Sheffield Hallam University

Engaging large cohorts in active learning through online discussion

Using Twitter and Storify to support and summarise class discussions

The aim

A requirement on the BA in English Literature was to increase contact time, and it was recognised that the most efficient way to do this is by bringing together the cohort as a whole, rather than smaller groups. Teaching has traditionally been based around discussion, but this has proven difficult with the larger groups of students. Therefore, the tutor wanted a method that would engage these large groups of students in the text such that their experience and learning would be similar to that of a smaller group..

Benefits

- Students felt an increased personal connection to the tutor
- Students can participate even when unable to physically attend
- Summarising discussions is a valuable learning process

The approach

During the first semester of the first year, students spend time studying examples of Renaissance drama and detective fiction. In order to ensure that the students were able to quickly gain an understanding of the basic plot of the works, screenings of adaptations were held on campus between 4 and 6 p.m. The timing of these was chosen with the intention of encouraging informal interaction between students and that they would continue their discussions after the screenings. The tutor chose adaptations that were available through SHUPlayer to allow students unable to attend in person to take part, to make the exercise as inclusive as possible.

The tutor had not used Twitter prior to this activity, but had seen its potential at a staff development event, so discussed some possible uses with her faculty e-learning team and decided to use Twitter for class discussions. Prior to the activity, the students were given a briefing about Twitter and, if they did not already have an account, were encouraged to sign-up to the service. Copies of SHU's social media guidance leaflets were also added to the module's Blackboard site as an additional resource.

During screenings, the students were prompted to discuss the adaptation by the tutor posing questions and pointing out aspects for consideration on Twitter. Students used Twitter on their personal mobile devices to respond to these prompts and each other's contributions. In order to demonstrate the public nature and global reach of social media and the need to be constructive while critiquing, the tutor solicited participation in the Twitter discussions from colleagues, friends and other contacts. In addition to this solicited participation, there were also contributions from individuals with no ties to the cohort or tutor.

Storify - a tool for collating social media contributions into an interactive online narrative - was used by the tutor to provide a structured summary of the discussions. In addition, students were encouraged to create their own Storify narratives of the activity that demonstrated their own perspective and views.

The outcome

Through the activity, the students gained an understanding of the public nature of critique and were able to take part in rich discussion with both fellow students and people from outside the cohort. Students also appreciated the tutor's decision to select adaptations based on their availability on SHUPlayer as the entirely online nature of the activity enabled them to take part despite other commitments.

The outcome

Initially, engagement from the students in the Twitter activity was very limited, with only 10 of the 110 in the cohort contributing during the first week. The tutor used prizes of chocolate to incentivise participation during the second week and contributions increased dramatically. However, there was a clear decline in participation during screenings of longer works, such as novels requiring multiple screenings to complete. This was attributed to the increased complexity of the work making it more challenging to both follow the narrative and contribute to the conversation. Despite this and the students' initial reluctance to take part, many of the students requested that the activity be continued into the second semester.

The process of collating the tweets into Storify was a useful activity for the tutor, providing an opportunity to reflect on the conversations and her students' understanding of the material, learn from their contributions, and provide additional context and resources around the discussion points. In addition, the students were particularly pleased when one of their tweets was included in Storify, helping generate further engagement in the activity.

Profile

Tutor name:
Jill Lebihan

Faculty:
Development & Society

Size of cohort:
Large (70-150 students)

Technologies used:
Twitter, Storify, SHUPlayer, Student-owned mobile devices, Blackboard

Future Development

The tutor intends to continue with the activity with future cohorts; however, as engagement levels decreased significantly with the longer, more complex novels, the tutor has decided to focus on shorter works that can fit into a single session.

The tutor also plans to propose Storify as a presentation tool to second year students, as an alternative to the commonly used Powerpoint and Prezi. This will make use of the tool's ability to create a slideshow from tweets, text, images and videos.

Recommendations

The tutor advises anyone interested in this approach to:

- clearly articulate the extent to which Twitter will be used as a general communication channel beyond the activity.

- prepare the students for the activity and push them to take part initially.

- raise the profile of the activity by integrating the Twitter stream into relevant Blackboard modules.