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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Enhancing engagement in large postgraduate capstone classes: Structured participation and one-on-one interaction

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Student engagement is increasingly recognised as an important factor influencing achievement and learning in higher education (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Mandernach, 2015). Sustaining meaningful engagement in large classrooms is difficult, particularly with diverse student cohorts and generational differences in learning preferences (Cuseo, 2007; Giunta, 2017; Maringe & Sina, 2014; Mendoza, 2019). While technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools are widely used to promote engagement through active learning (McKinsey & Company, 2022), they do not always address the deeper, relational aspects of engagement that help students feel connected and supported (Crawford et al., 2024). In an era of constant technological change, personal teacher-student and peer relationships remain vital to creating safe and supportive environments where students feel seen and are encouraged to share ideas, ask questions, and seek help.

This Pecha Kucha introduces a classroom-based intervention designed to enhance engagement in a large postgraduate accounting capstone unit. It draws on Kahu and Nelson's (2018) concept of the educational interface, a psychosocial space where institutional and student factors interact. It also builds on the findings of Kahu, Picton and Nelson (2020), who found that supportive conversations, empathy and encouragement as key triggers for student engagement. This intervention involves an oral participation assessment that incorporates structured participation and one-on-one interaction to foster connection and conversation.

The unit enrolled approximately 250 students across three workshops of 65–95 students each, many from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Engagement in such contexts is challenging, particularly when students face barriers to oral participation. To address this, the participation assessment was reimagined to be inclusive and multifaceted. For consistency and efficiency in assessment, groups were formed through a structured networking activity in Week 1, establishing table-based peer cohorts for the semester. Participation was scaffolded through three pathways: whole-class discussion, small-group conversation, and one-on-one interaction with staff. During case-based activities, staff and assistants rotated between tables in structured engagement rounds. These real-time conversations provided quieter or linguistically hesitant students with opportunities to contribute in low-pressure settings. Weekly feedback was integrated into class time to reinforce progress and support iterative learning.

Although digital tools and generative AI were embedded to aid discussion, content review, and peer collaboration, the heart of the practice lies in the high-touch, relational nature of teaching. It highlights how innovation in TEL can come from reimagining how we use structure, space, and time within existing classroom ecosystems. This approach complements technology in education by embedding purposeful human interaction that strengthens engagement and learning.

Students reported high levels of satisfaction, particularly with having multiple ways to participate and opportunities to feel seen and heard. One staff member reflected that the structured conversations mirrored workplace readiness by giving students practice in reporting succinctly to senior leaders. Workshop assistants noted that the assessment motivated preparation and improved real-time communication, particularly for students less inclined to speak voluntarily.

Challenges included time pressures associated with rotating through tables and ensuring fairness in marking. These were managed through collaborative planning, transparent criteria, and clearly defined participation roles. The overall outcome was a relational learning environment that made large classes feel smaller, more inclusive, and more responsive.

In an era of digital transformation, this case highlights the enduring value of intentional, human-centric assessment design. Purposefully combining TEL with low-tech strategies affirms that low-

tech does not mean low-impact; rather, it demonstrates pedagogical resilience that places equity, connection, and student voice at the centre of technology-rich higher education.

Keywords: case study, student engagement, large classroom, human-centric pedagogy, oral participation, employability skills, multicultural education.

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