

BEST PRACTICES FROM EDUBOTS



EDUBOTS



- **Target group:**
Mature university students
- **Type of program:**
Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC)
- **Discipline:**
Education
- **Language availability:**
English
- **Solution:**
Differ chatbot

Use case:

Online Chat and Chatbots to Enhance
Mature Student Engagement in Higher Education (HE).

Short description:

During the academic year 2020/2021, the Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC) at the University of Leeds in the UK, decided to pilot an online chat platform 'Differ' including a chatbot 'Bo' after it had seen a decline in the use of programme Facebook groups. To promote student engagement and monitor the Differ online communities, sixteen digital student mentors were recruited and trained. During the pilot, feedback was collected from students and student mentors.

Need/ added value:

Mature students transitioning into their first year of HE face many difficulties that affect their motivation, participation and success. They are more likely to study part-time at all levels, to work in skilled employment and to drop out of their course after their first year. Their feelings of being disconnected from their peers and from their institutions, in addition to the challenges they face while managing their finances and family responsibilities, are among the key barriers to the successful completion of their courses. This feeling of detachment can reduce their 'sense of belonging' and has been shown to lower retention at HE institutions. Encouraging online student engagement among mature students to establish social connection with their instructors and peers can significantly reduce their isolation. The use of technology as a tool to promote student engagement has been shown to be successful in accelerating the achievement of students' learning outcomes and in creating online learning communities that can foster students' collaborative efforts.





Educator Preparation:

Digital Student Mentors (DSMs) were recruited and trained to promote interactions on the online communities. The purpose of the DSM training is twofold: to facilitate the screening and selection of the best mentors, ensuring that the ones recruited can provide appropriate support and to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge for their roles.

How to get started:

Sixteen DSMs were recruited, representing each programme and both standard age and mature students. A DSM community on the Differ application was set up and all DSMs were asked to join. This community was used by all the DSMs to communicate with each other and to ask questions of the staff. Two online training sessions were delivered to the DSMs at different times to ensure that all DSMs could attend. These sessions were recorded and shared in the DSM community for reference along with a handbook with useful resources to help them perform their role. The handbook listed all the transferable skills that the DSMs would develop during their roles: general guidelines on how to professionally handle spamming, fake news and trolling in their communities; a list of Dos and Don'ts; potential challenges and how to overcome them; contact details for LLC staff and information about the available support for students at the university.

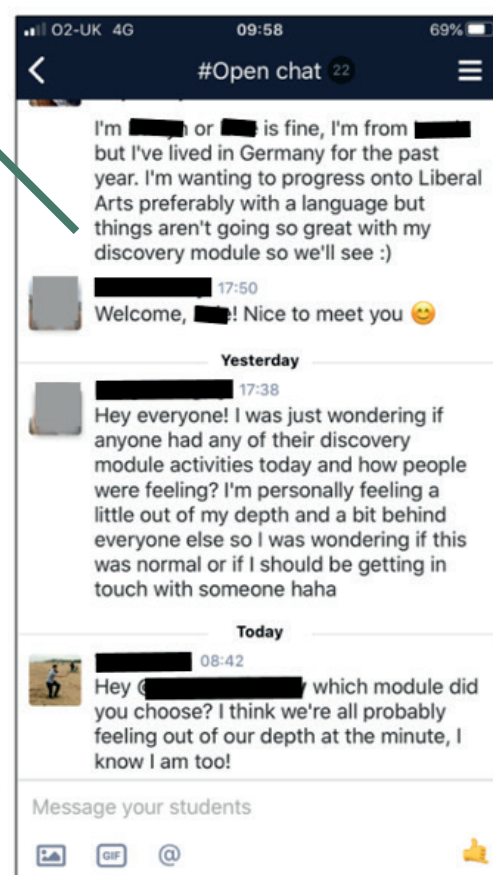
Example from real classroom application

A Conversation Screenshot from the Arts and Humanities Foundation Year Community

How to engage your students:

Creating and Inviting Students to the Communities:

Unless students were on a foundation year, they would generally be invited to join a minimum of three Differ communities: a community for all LLC students, one for each year group (multi-disciplinary) across programmes and one community for all years on each programme (discipline specific). These spaces did not have tutor presence in order to separate the chat space from formal academic spaces. This aimed to create safer spaces where students would feel comfortable talking to their classmates and to learn from other year groups and students from other programmes. Links to communities were emailed to students to invite them to join Differ. Students going onto level 2 & 3 of their degrees were invited to join Differ two weeks before the start of the academic year.





What happens next:

Educators are able to summarize data about attendance, answers to polls, or present graphical data results regarding e.g. student progress. Also, teachers are able to focus on the teaching material rather than answering repetitive questions about evaluation or practical information about the course.

Tips

- *Recruit and train digital student mentors to monitor the online communities and professionally handle spamming, fake news and trolling in their communities.*
- *Provide digital training and clear instructions to mature students on the various features of the chatbot application to create a positive user experience and impact their beliefs about the usefulness of the application.*

Pros

- *Many mature students stated that they found the online communities on Differ to be safe places for them to ask questions anytime anywhere without being judged.*
- *Using Differ can allay students' concerns about online safety and data sovereignty as students do not have to share any personal details or telephone numbers with their peers.*
- *Differ enhanced PHE (Preparation for Higher Education) part-time students' sense of belonging and engagement with other PHE students.*

Further Possibilities

- *Differ is particularly appropriate to boost student engagement among non-standard student cohorts. Hence, it could be used with International students joining the Summer School, or students enrolled in interdisciplinary programs.*

