Talk to Them not at Them: A Teacher-Initiated Model of Engagement (TIME) in Online Learning

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Abstract

This paper proposes that limited teacher-student interaction in large online classes can lead to a higher attrition rate. TIME as an e-learning pedagogy can avert the situation. TIME is a cyber classroom management style comprising of student engagement techniques used to address attrition and ensure quality education. This model has been found to increase student participation in a research class in the Master of Development Communication program of the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU). Guided by the Theory of Interaction and Communication (Holmberg 1995), the study employed a quasi-experimental research design. From February to May 2018, submission bins were carefully tracked. A spreadsheet was prepared to document students' submissions in the portal to include the date submitted to find out if TIME can decrease the attrition rate. The "treatments" include output affirmation; active "listening" to questions raised; quick responses to queries; student alerts or notifications; providing direct instructions on what needs to be done instead of leaving responses to chance; providing transitions to encourage continuous conversation by posting questions that will require further thinking, action, and revert; conducive learning environment; and, coaching and mentoring. Results were compared with the performance of students enrolled in the same subject from previous years, where TIME was not employed. Indeed, a difference was observed in terms of completion rates. Hence, it can be concluded that a responsive teacher encourages students to complete their tasks thus decreasing attrition rates in online learning. As independent learners, students can experience cognitive dissonance as a result of teachers' delayed responses to their questions. Teachers, on the other hand, have to beat time to meet expectations. However, with MOODLE on mobile, a simple "I'll get back to you shortly" is consolation enough for students to know that they are being attended to, which could lengthen their patience. A volatile learning environment where the teacher is separated from the learner could be compensated by a click of a button with a smiley at the end of the phrase to say, "I'm here to lend an ear."

Keywords: MyPortal, attrition rate, volatile learning environment

Introduction

In any learning environmental setting, the ultimate goal is the completion of leaners. Sadly, completion of a degree or training program largely depends on enrollee/trainee performance. Pitman and Moodle (2017) forward several factors that affect student attrition in Australia. These are age, socio-economic status, location, and time on campus. However, in this study, the focus was on above-average student-to-staff ratios as an indicator of student-lecturer interaction. The second was above-average ratios of part-time enrollments while the third was above-average ratios of external enrollments such as online students. Results showed that part-time and external enrollments were at higher risks of dropping out because they juggle work and studies. The same study cited that in the UK Open Universities, the attrition rate was at 43.5%.

In a related study, Edwards and McMillan (2015) found that students who come from indigenous groups, part-timers, external students (online), over 25 years old, from far-flung areas, and from poor socio-economic backgrounds have lower completion rates.

Simpson (2013) suggested that institutional attitudes to student retention were the main barrier to student success in distance education. Similarly, Bawa (2016) forwarded that institutions and faculty must recognize the importance of creating more interactive and better-designed online course content. Müller's (2008) study on student's persistence showed that multiple responsibilities and insufficient interaction with faculty, technology, and coursework were influential factors.

If teacher-student interaction is important, how should students be engaged then? Bigatel (2016) said strategies to encourage student engagement include: interaction and timely feedback; relevance and real-world application; and, motivation/interest. Student-teacher interaction hastens understanding of content, which could be done through dialogue, discussions, or blogs. Interaction makes a student feel supported in their journey. The courses being taken should be relevant where students can share their experiences. The motivation or interest of students to be engaged can be hastened using tools for online meetings. It can be implied that the key to decreasing attrition rates rests on how the teacher engages with him, her, or their students.

In a similar study, Dixson (2010) found that student engagement could be strengthened through effective online instruction. She said that "research into effective online instruction offers three conclusions: 1) online instruction can be as effective as traditional instruction; 2) to do so, online courses need cooperative/collaborative (active) learning; and, 3) strong instructor presence" (p.1).

Briggs (2015) identified 10 ways to overcome barriers to student engagement. He forwarded that "students may become disengaged if they feel isolated or if they do not get to interact with their instructor and peers" (p.1). These are:

1. make first contact before the course begins;
2. create an introductory activity;
3. provide opportunities for learner interaction;
4. encourage sharing;
5. establish contact method and hours;
6. provide directions often in various ways;
7. provide effective and timely feedback;
8. chunk your content;
9. send reminders to keep students on track; and,
10. use a variety of multimedia and modalities.

How could educational institutions ensure completion rate when student's success largely depends on a number of influential factors? Similar conditions can be applied to DEVC 204 students, Communication Research and Evaluation under the Master of Development Communication (MDC) program. The UPOU uses MOODLE as its Learning Management System (LMS). Students enrolled in MDC are all online learners studying on a part-time basis.

DEVC 204 expects students to gain a better understanding of communication research and its role in development communication work. In addition, students shall acquire the ability to conceptualize and develop a research proposal, pre-test, and evaluate selected communication materials, as well as plan and conduct a simple evaluation of a development communication program or project.

As indicated in the Course Guide, students have to submit six assignments in the submission bin due on the following indicative dates (Table 1):

Table 1

Assignment submission plan

Tutor Marked Assignments	Indicative date of submission
TMA 1 (Developing the Introductory Part of a Research Proposal)	20 February 2018
TMA 2 (Developing the Review of Related Literature and Methodology Chapters)	20 March 2018
TMA 3 (Evaluating a Development Communication Project)	10 April 2018
TMA 4 (Pretesting of Communication Materials)	15 April 2018
Term Project (Integration of TMAs 1 and 2)	1 April 2018
VPRP (Video Presentation of Research Proposal)	21 April - 5 May

However, students were given the option to submit anytime within the semester, dates being indicative, or follow a non-linear, non-sequential system for submission of assignments. While there was some flexibility in submissions, all requirements must be in on or before 7 May 2018, the end of classes for the second semester of SY 2017-2018.

Objectives

The study assumed that TIME could decrease attrition rate that encourages learners to complete the subject which appeared forceful but smoothly carried out. Thus, the study aimed to:

1. determine completion rate in teaching DEVC 204 during the second semester of SY 2017-2018 with TIME employed;
2. find out how TIME interactions have influenced completion rate in teaching DEVC 204 during the second semester of SY 2017- 2018; and,
3. compare completion rates of DEVC 204 in SY 2017-2018 to SY 2014-2015, SY 2015-2016, and SY 2016-2017.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Interaction and Communication by Börje Holmberg (1995) also known as "guided didactic conversation" explains the relationship between teaching effectiveness and the impact of feelings of belonging and cooperation that occur during mediated communication. This involves actual exchange of questions, answers, and arguments during the teaching-learning process.

Holmberg's theory forwards seven assumptions (p. 27):

1. The core of teaching is interaction between the teaching and learning parties;
2. Emotional involvement in the study and feelings of personal relationship between the teaching and learning parties is likely to contribute to learning pressure;
3. Learning pleasure supports student motivation;
4. Participation in decision-making concerning the study is favorable to student motivation;

5. Strong student motivation facilitates learning;
6. A friendly, personal tone and easy access to the subject matter contribute to learning pleasure, support student motivation, and thus facilitate learning; and,
7. The effectiveness of teaching is demonstrated by student's learning of what has been taught.

With this grounding, a conceptual framework was formulated to enhance the teaching-learning process.

Conceptual Framework

Teacher-Initiated Model of Engagement (TIME)

TIME was conceived in an attempt to increase the completion rate in courses taken. As a Faculty In-Charge (FIC), the goal was to see that all students complete the course. However, there is a notion that it is not the responsibility of the teacher as to how their students perform. Thus, the high attrition rate in many courses if not in the program. While there is no study done about the attrition rate in MDC, the low graduation rate is indicative of high attrition rates. On this premise, more innovative online education pedagogy has to be developed in order to address the various factors that would influence completion.

Given that student-teacher interaction is one limitation in online learning, could the solution then be through the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)? Such interaction may have to be initiated by the teacher as the facilitator of learning. The regular online presence of the teacher may inspire students to get engaged and feel that they are not alone. This model dubbed as TIME, which stands for Teacher-Initiated Model of Engagement refers to a cyber classroom management style involving student engagement techniques to address attrition and ensure quality education.

These student engagement techniques to be initiated by the teacher are as follows:

1. Output affirmation

   This is a process of giving positive comments to knowledge products submitted by students. Acknowledging outputs with kind words can lift the mood and spirit of the receiver of comments especially if these are in blue if one uses track changes. In commenting on outputs, the FIC can start with a few encouraging words like "the proposal looks promising," or "very interesting topic," or "proposal is novel." Then, the FIC can start giving comments on how to improve on the submission like "Perhaps, you may want to tweak your research question to make it like a communication study." Comments on assignments can either break or make the students' day. It is like looking at a glass "half full" rather than half empty. Negative comments may lead to students losing interest.

2. Active "listening" to questions raised

   Online learners go into the cyber classroom, which in this case is the "Myportal" Making students feel that it is just a click away can compensate for the physical absence of the teacher. Questions raised have to be listened to at all times to sustain student's interest and the momentum for the search of knowledge. Innovative ideas should be entertained

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instead of blocked-in aid of developing a critical mind. There are times when facilitators are not familiar with a certain theory or concept used in the research proposal, the tendency of the teacher is to change the idea of the student and insist on what they know.

3. Quick responses to queries

A short "I'll get back to you shortly" could solve a student's problem at that very moment. Since teachers also have a life to live, these short messages are "fillers" so to speak to tell students to just wait a bit for your substantive comments. With MOODLE on mobile, it is quite easy to respond to these messages that could mean a lot to the receiver. Teacher-student relationship is strengthened for that short but meaningful response.

4. Student alerts or notifications

Like using a credit card, notifications are sent when payment is due. In online learning, periodic reminders should be done. This could be a week before the deadline of an assignment. Attention of students who are delayed in submission be called to remind them of their obligations. This could be done through the portal or via SMS or yahoo messenger.

5. Providing direct instructions on what needs to be done instead of leaving responses to chance

The FIC should be able to indicate what needs to be done. Remember that the student is alone who has nobody but himself/herself or theirself to depend on. Provide clear directions, suggest references, or provide sample works for students to benchmark or at least have an idea on the expectations. Students in DEVC 204 have to work independently in the absence of discussion forums. Thus, the FIC should always be available for assistance and guidance.

6. Providing transitions to encourage continuous conversation by posting questions that will require further thinking, action, and revert.

The use of emoticons has become part of the lexicon. A smiley at the end of a sentence, comment, or question inspires students to revert with a smiley as well. For example: Got your submission! It is much better now with your revisions. What if you use agenda-setting theory instead? Whadyathink?:) This implies that the FIC conveys warmth and always ready to lend an ear.

7. Conducive learning environment

Unlike conventional schools, online learning environment relies on ICTs to communicate or interact with one another. *Myportal* should be likened to a living classroom where students are not treated as avatars but people who need guidance and constant interactions. Being strict with deadlines is good but not always necessary in view of the nature of distance education and the type of learners. With ICTs, communication is made faster and easier but if the other end of the line is closed, it is tantamount to visiting the teacher in the office but nowhere to be found. Such absence creates frustration and disappointments, which may eventually lead to dropping out.

8. Coaching and mentoring

In classes where DFs are not available, oral consultation through Skype, Google meet or any other online meeting platform would be an alternative. Doing research is very different from writing a news article or producing a radio program. It requires dialogue and clear understanding of what needs to be done. The FIC can talk to each student at the start of the course, after the title submission, and before the Term Project is submitted. With these initiatives, students will be more engaged, "pressured," and accountable of their respective performances.

In TIME, the teacher reaches out to the student and not the other way around. It is a dynamic, cyclical, and never-ending process to ensure quality education and a response to accommodating differing learning styles and online student predicaments with a heart to decrease attrition rates. In TIME, the student is at the center of the teaching-learning process. In TIME, time is of the essence and therefore should not go to waste.

Figure 1

TIME elements and relationships
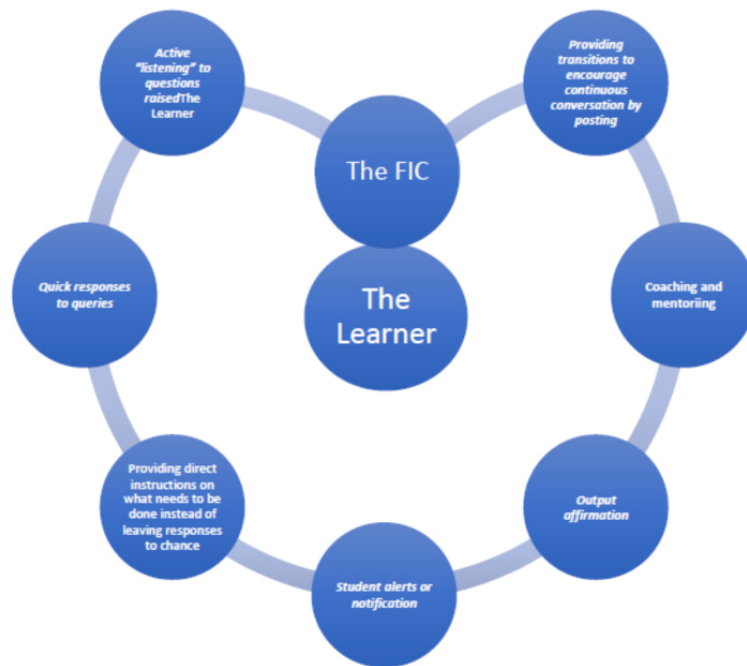
Methodology

The study employed a quasi-experimental research design. From February to May 2018, submission bins were carefully tracked. A spreadsheet was prepared to document students' submissions in the portal to include date submitted to find out if TIME decreased attrition rate. The "treatments" include:

1. Output affirmation;
2. Active "listening" to questions raised;
3. Quick responses to queries;
4. Student alerts or notifications;

5. Providing direct instructions on what needs to be done instead of leaving responses to chance;
6. Providing transitions to encourage continuous conversation by posting questions that will require further thinking, action, and revert;
7. Conducive learning environment; and,
8. Coaching and mentoring.

Data Gathering Procedures

Submissions were extracted using engagement analytics by TMA based on indicative date of submission, which is one feature of *Myportal.*

Data Analysis

While submissions were based on indicative dates submitted, the last day of submission was also considered since the instruction provided that submissions can be made anytime within the semester on or before the set deadline. Results are presented in graphs, which were compared then with performance of students enrolled in the same subject from SY 2014-2015, SY 2015-2016, and SY 2016-2017 where TIME was not employed.

Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, and means were used to analyze results.

<div align="center">

Results

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Completion rates of Tutor Marked Assignments

DEVC 204 for the second semester of SY 2017-2018 was composed of 85 students. Of the 85, 4 officially dropped for personal reasons in the middle of the semester leaving 81 students. For purposes of computation, the total N for the study is 85.

For the first assignment, only 7 or less than 10% submitted TMA1 on the indicative due date (20 Feb) since they were given an option to submit anytime within the semester. However, students were asked to submit their research topics as early as January prior to developing TMA1 requirements being sequential. Announcement in the portal was made to acknowledge submissions and comments given to guide students in developing their research proposal to wit:

By 4 March, this was the announcement:

Figure 2

Course Announcement

> Hi, Guys!
>
> Have read very interesting proposals. I'm waiting for the rest of the 35:-) Please submit soon so I can help you develop your term project.
>
> It would be good to submit it now and not at the end of the semester so you will have enough time to improve on it.
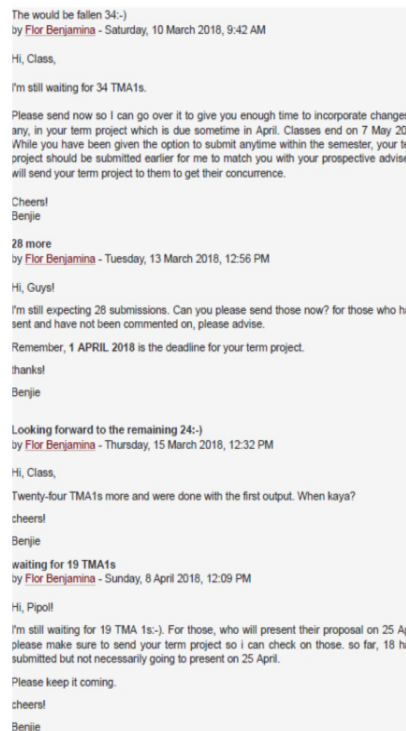>
> cheers!
>
> benjie

The increase from 7 to 35 before 4 March could be attributed to the reminder as exemplified in TIME, the element of output affirmation. This was followed by the following messages starting 10 March:

Figure 3

Message thread from course

In view of the extended deadline, a total of 75 submissions were received or 88.24%. The extension implies less students who will be enrolling in the course again, less cost on the part of the university, and promotes hope and enthusiasm to complete the degree. The little accommodation earned an extra mile for a lot of students who juggled work and studies. Figure 4 presents the completion rate for TMA1 from SY 2014-2015 to SY 2017-2018.

Figure 4

*Completion rate for TMA1 in DEVC 204 from 2014-2018*
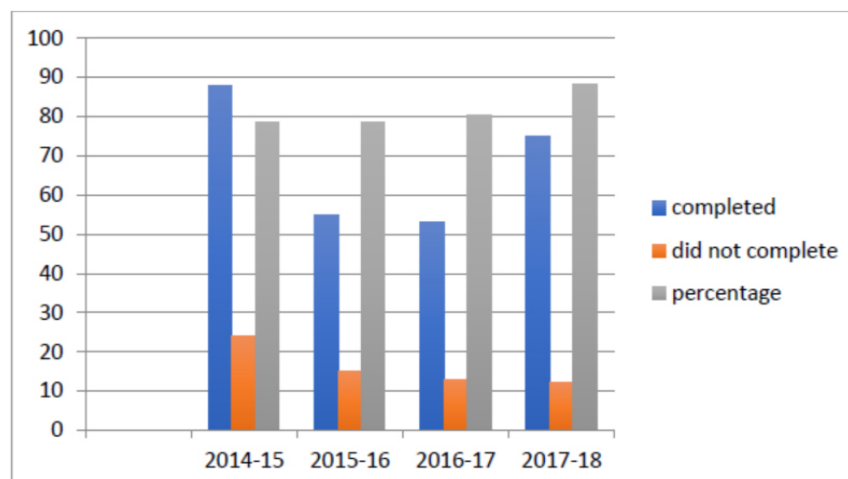
In terms of TMA2, completion rate was 65.88%, which was expected since there were students who were only able to submit TMA1. Submission of TMA2 was dependent on TMA1, which connotes that if TMA1 has not been commented on, the student cannot proceed to developing TMA2 (Figure 5).
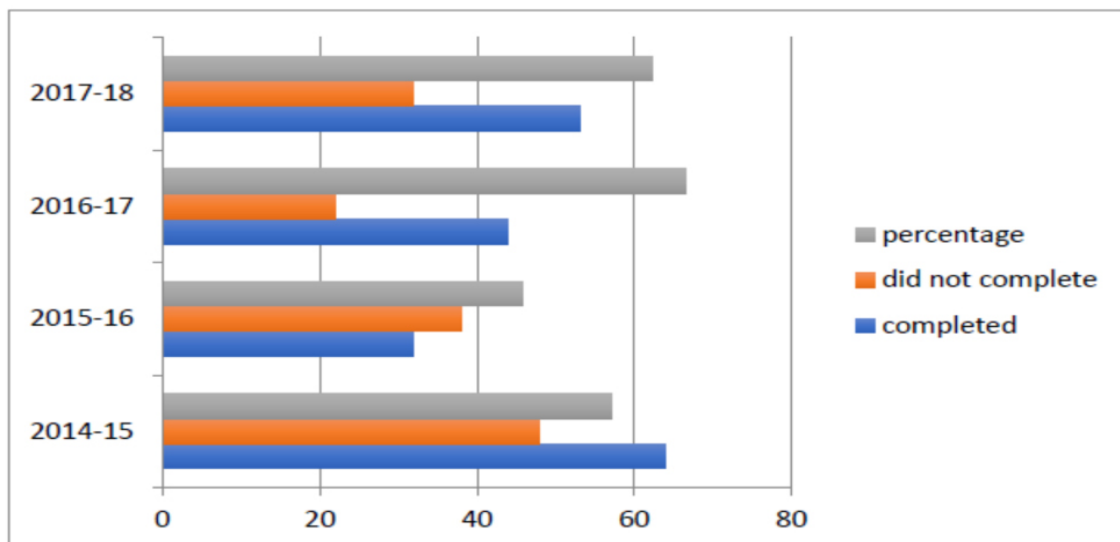
Figure 5

Completion rate of TMA2 in DEVC 204
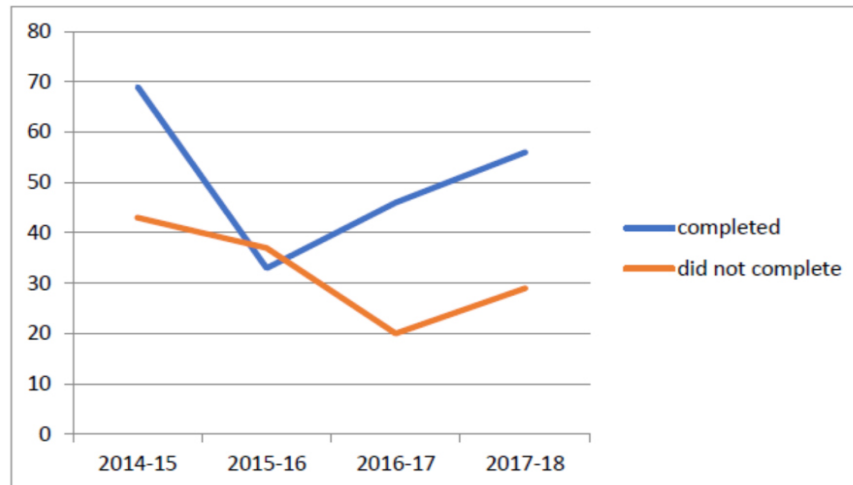
The completion rate for submission of the Term Project reached 62.5% by end of the extension, which was a little lower than TMA2 at 65.88%. It can be surmised that changes to be made based on comments could have taken some time to complete. Figure 6 presents the completion rate for the Term Project.
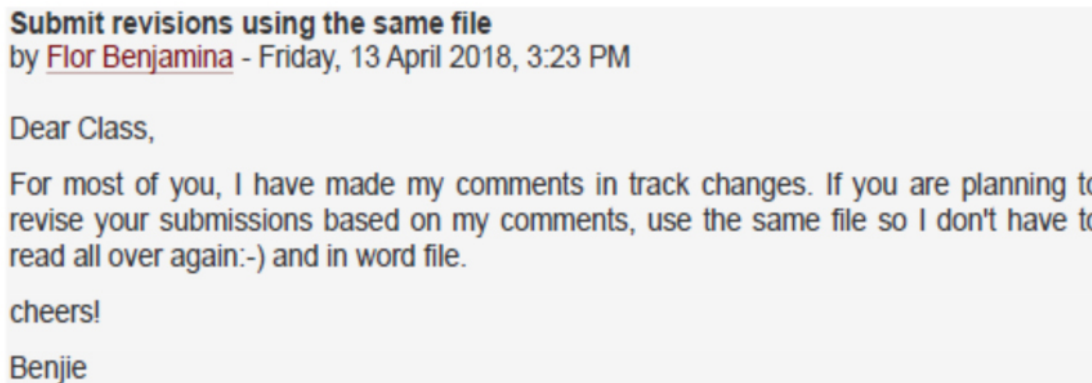
Figure 6

Completion rate of the Term Project in DEVC 204

As the deadline approaches, teacher engagement in the form of gentle reminders signaled students to heed the call.

Figure 7

Course announcement

> **Submit revisions using the same file**
> by Flor Benjamina - Friday, 13 April 2018, 3:23 PM
>
> Dear Class,
>
> For most of you, I have made my comments in track changes. If you are planning to revise your submissions based on my comments, use the same file so I don't have to read all over again:-) and in word file.
>
> cheers!
>
> Benjie

For TMA3, completion rate was 67.06%, which was a little higher compared to TMA2 and the Term Project because it is a separate requirement and requires a different skill. Not many MDC students have research background in their undergraduate years making it difficult to do one unlike TMA 3. It is also a kind of research but more on evaluation that requires a specific methodology to employ. It can be gleaned from the data that in the last four years, completion of this assignment was consistently high (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Completion rate of TMA3 in DEVC 204
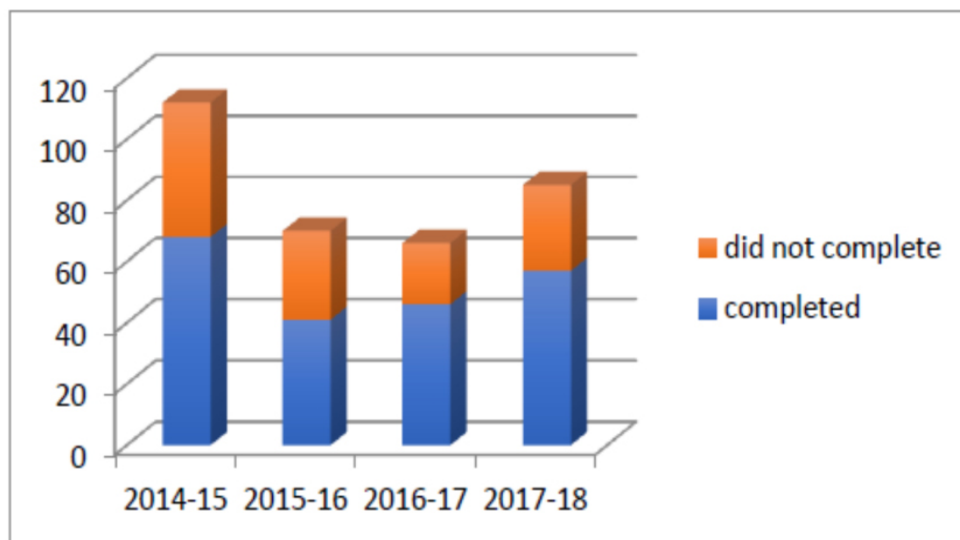
TMA 4, on the other hand, which also required a different skill, had a completion rate of 61.18%, which is slightly lower than TMA 3. This assignment needs production of communication materials that have to be pretested. Again, it demonstrates skills on research but more laborious since it has to be conducted. Figure 9 presents the completion rate.
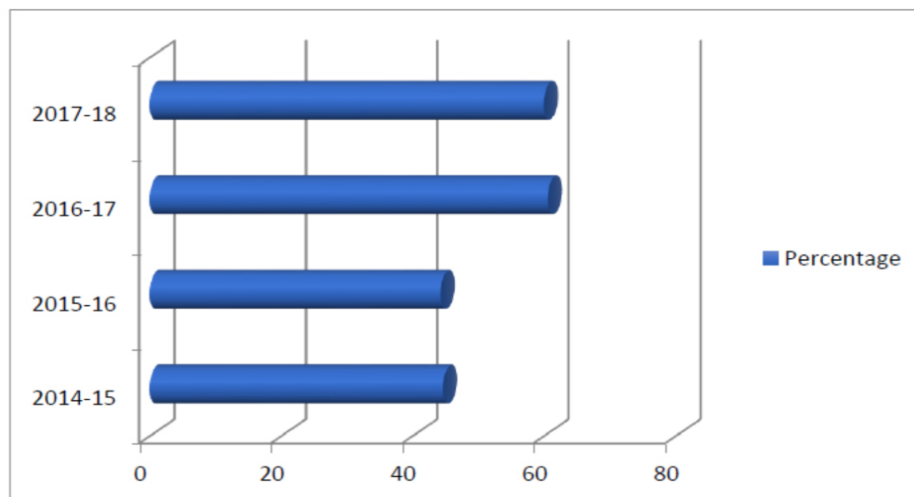
Figure 9

Completion rate of TMA4 in DEVC 204
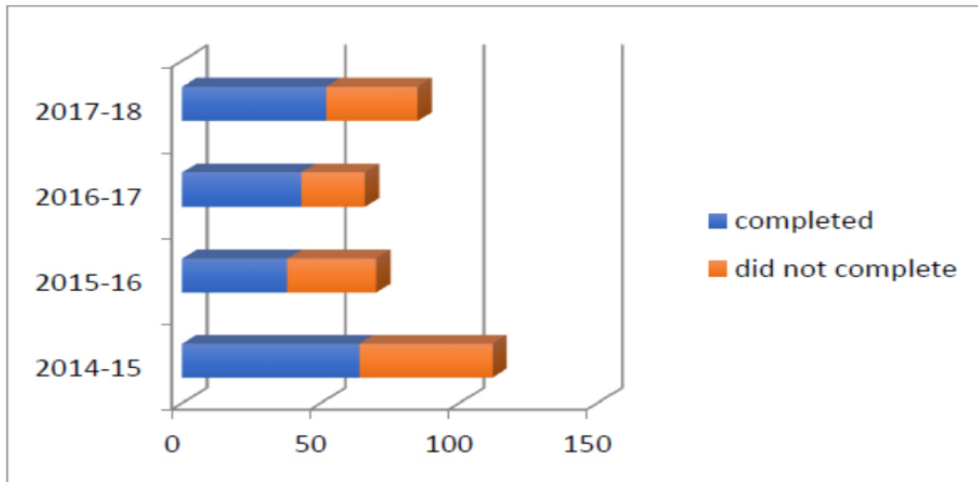
The VPRP is the culminating activity. Students have to record themselves, upload the video publicly on YouTube for classmates or others to comment on. This exercise is like collaborative learning where the author gets comments to improve their research proposal. This could have been an easy 20% of the requirements but demands some skills like video production, which they all have undertaken in DEVC 206. There were those who have completed their Term Project but where not able to produce the VPRP due to lack of time despite the extension given. In all four years, the highest completion rate was 60%. Figure 10 presents the completion rate in VPRP.

**Figure 10**

Completion rate in VPRP

Overall, completion rate for DEVC 204 was pegged at 60%. However, this figure would not have been reached without TIME. As well, submission rates for all TMAs have increased. Assuming that the portal for DEVC 204 had been closed on 7 May 2018 as scheduled, completion rate was a measly 38%. The offered extension gave students more time to complete their requirements. Students, more often than not start reading what needs to be read but put them aside to go back to later which may be past the deadline.

The constant interactions may have pushed students to comply. Keeping students updated **of** deadlines, what to submit, and answering all inquiries sent through email or via the portal added to decreasing the attrition rate (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Completion rate in DEVC 204 in SY 2014-2018
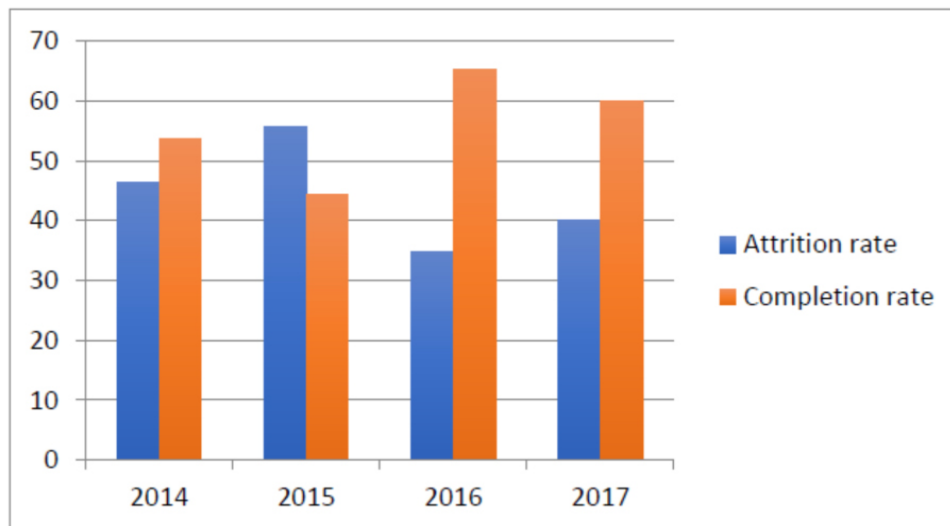
Discussion

The increase in completion rate of submissions could be attributed to TIME as an intervention. The tendency of online learners is to gain attention for them to participate as dictated by the communication platform. As online learners, the cyber classroom becomes a space for interaction and not simply as medium to earn a degree or interact with the uploaded modules. MOODLE with its features is just like engaging with any social media platform or Facebook (FB) for instance. Submissions being done electronically simulate FB interaction. In social media, emoticons or emojis are used to communicate how one feels or expresses oneself. In like manner, submission of TMAs is like postings on FB or twitter or Instagram that expects the receiver to react. Reactions from receivers should be quick and spontaneous. Such feedback resonates with the way the FIC feels about the submission. Emoticons for one are highly communicative symbols as a response to the post. Of course, the emoticons in MOODLE are limited unlike in social media platforms.

Online learners who are mostly independent would always expect a quick revert. Once the FIC sends a comment, almost instantaneously the learner responds with an emoticon that communicates a positive reaction. Times have changed on how the online teaching-learning process is carried out because of the communication platform used. The virtual world becomes the real world where immediate feedback is expected. Feedback, however, should be positive or constructive to encourage learners to revert with a smiley in return.

Regardless of the nature of submissions, learners still feel that constant interaction can ease the tension of waiting for a response. Since teachers, more often than not belong to a different genre; it is therefore imperative to have a paradigm shift on how to treat their online classes. Gone are the days where the teacher is the authority in the classroom. Twenty-first century learning style is propelled by ICTs that requires instant reaction and accommodation. Such affordances are the nature of digital communication.

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While the teacher may not expect quick revert, learners behave otherwise. This is the reason why online teachers should be more engaging and accommodating. Self-expression, self-generated content, and self-indulgence are characteristics of cyber classrooms where learners can freely and openly write their thoughts and use emoticons or emojis that would help express what they want to say. With the various types of emoticons or emojis where one is desperately requesting for a deadline or needs to read more to beef up their review of related literature, one could receive a crying emoji or a closed palm that means an appeal that warrants an approval.

The constant reminders of deadlines likewise were received well as evidenced by the increase in submissions by assignment. This is also to show gratitude that learners are being taken care of. The pleasure of according attention is tantamount to compliance with a happy face because they no longer have to re-enroll the course even if they have not completed all requirements.

This implies that talking to the students and not reprimanding or scolding them can encourage participation. In cases where plagiarism has been committed which is not unlikely in online learning, a gentle reminder like "submit something that cannot be challenged" sends the message that submission was doubtful without directly hurting the ego of the student. In online learning, once the ego gets hurt, there could be a falling out just like in a relationship. In this case, screen relationship that calls for mutual respect regardless of the wrong committed. Understandably, the absence of the teacher in online learning translates to cheating and if caught can lead to depression or mental health disorder.

Extending the deadline also means giving hope towards completing the course. A kind heart can go a long way for learners who are juggling work and studies and other responsibilities upon their shoulders. A strict teacher has to be more understanding, forgiving, and open to adapt to circumstances that learners are in despite the consequences of late submission of grades or salary deduction. Disciplining online learner can only hamper participation and is frowned upon because the virtual classroom is likened to how they behave in social media.

Conclusion

Online learning affordances through TIME led to decreased attrition rates. TIME encouraged students to complete their courses and eventually their degrees. Indeed, changes in completion rate were observed by employing TIME. Opening the lines in online education affirms connectivity that shapes a healthy relationship between teacher and student. While the assumption that students in online learning are "fully autonomous learners," reality speaks otherwise. Indeed, a volatile learning environment where the teacher is separated from the learner could be compensated by mediated communication methods through a click of a button with a smiley at the end of the phrase to say "I'm here to lend an ear."

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