**Student and Lecturer in the Connected Age**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This study investigated what are the reasons behind the lack of direct, verbal communication between students and lecturers during classes at the University of Westminster. It also explored whether an Online Audience Response System (OARS) would benefit the future classes by reducing the problem. The data were obtained from 34 University of Westminster students via an online survey, which explored 7 main factors that could explain the lack of communication: Shyness, Anxiety, Boredom, Laziness, Tiredness, Extent of knowledge on the topic and Language barrier. We hypothesised that the main contributor to students’ avoidance to address the lecturer during the class will be shyness based on background reading. The study revealed that according to the University of Westminster students the main two reasons for the lack of verbal Student-Lecturer communication was shyness (64% of respondents), and anxiety (61% of respondents). Students’ views on this topic were further explored by asking open-ended questions and responses gathered further supported our hypothesis, with students revealing their reluctance to speak up due to the fear of social embarrassment, fear of deviating from popular opinion and shyness. Based on the fact that the two domineering factors were revealed to be Shyness and Anxiety it would be advisable to implement OARS since the influence of both factors could be reduced with the help of anonymity.

**BACKGROUND AND AIMS**

Our team’s rationale for initiating the study was based on personal observations of Student-Lecturer interactions during classes and notice that there was very little of it, even in instances where lecturer directly addresses the audience. Identifying what causes the lack of interaction and reducing such reasons would benefit future classes immensely. Students would get a more in-depth and personalised explanation for the topic and resolve any questions they have, while lecturers would be able to gain an insight which aspects of the topic students

struggle with the most and which aspects facilitate the most interest in the subject. We hypothesised that the main reason behind this particular issue was shyness, furthermore, this hypothesis supported the background literature surrounding this topic.

A Study by Latham & Hill (2014) was one among many others investigating why students tend to stay quiet during the lectures and how OARS would increase student-lecturer interaction. They found that 75% of students involved in the study

agreed that OARS is a desirable feature of future classes. Moreover, open-ended questions revealed some interesting insights, with students saying: “It is often embarrassing in a huge lecture hall to raise your hand and answer a question, especially if you get the answer wrong” (anonymous), or “Anonymity allows me to express my ideas without worrying about the opinions of my classmates. Therefore I am more likely to give my honest opinion if I know my answer will be anonymous”. Classroom interaction is difficult not only for students but for lecturers as well. Alyson & Hill (2014) acknowledged that in a large lecture hall with more than 100 students, it is impossible for a lecturer to allow each student to express themselves, even if they were brave enough to do so.

Such issues are especially true considering that nowadays student populations in universities are becoming increasingly diverse, making student preferences for learning even more disparate. For instance, Komarraju et al. (2011) revealed that student’s learning style depends on student’s Extraversion score - a personality trait from The Big 5 inventory that determines how likely a particular person is to engage in social contact. It can be deduced that more extroverted students will prefer learning by speaking to others, while students lower on Extroversion scale will not involve themselves in the class discussion as much, and thus be in a disadvantage compared to their peers. OARS would be a useful tool that would help more introverted students to express themselves and interact with the lecturer more freely without having to engage in direct social interaction. Importance of classroom participation was supported by Rocca (2010), who reviewed journal articles on classroom participation between 1958 and 2009. The study found that classroom participation indeed positively correlated with information retention after the class,

critical thinking, and higher marks. In essence, facilitating student-lecturer

interaction in classrooms would contribute to positive students’ learning experience and a better understanding of the topics surrounding their degrees.

Our study achieved its aim of assessing the main reasons behind the lack of Student-Lecturer interaction by releasing an online survey that asked students to identify what factors make them reluctant to voice themselves out during the class as well as their opinion on the usage of OARS. As mentioned previously, our data revealed that Shyness and Anxiety are the most influential factors that account to this issue according to the University of Westminster respondents. We particularly aim to attract the attention of course leaders of the University of Westminster since we strongly believe that our findings support the idea of OARS being a helpful tool in future classes, and course leaders presumably would be the most equipped to comment on the topic. It could increase Student-Lecturer interaction during the class which can eventually lead to other benefits, such as higher grades, higher course satisfaction and lowered reluctance to ask for clarification from the lecturer.

**METHODS**

To gather data this study employed an online questionnaire created on ‘SurveyMonkey’ platform. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to record demographic participant information, including age, gender, level of study and which school they are in. The second part consisted of series of statements designed to assess each of the 7 factors and how well those statements apply to the respondent on Likert scale. An example of such a statement was: *“I feel embarrassed when I have to speak while other students are listening”*, with respondent having to rate

how well this statement applied to them on a scale from 1 to 5. For each of the 7 factors

there were 3 accompanying statements intended to test the strength of the factor in relation to the student-lecturer classroom interaction. The third part consisted of respondents’ knowledge and attitudes towards OARS as a tool to enhance student-lecturer communication. This section of the questionnaire was concerned particularly with if respondents have ever used OARS in the past themselves, if they knew anyone who did and if they think that it would be a useful tool in the classroom. A sample question was: *“Would an anonymous online audience response system encourage you to express views that does not conform to your peers’ views?”*.

Our target population was not limited to the level of study, course or demographics as long as participants were the University of Westminster students. The target population was selected in such a wide way in order to collect data that would be representative to all students as much as possible.

The survey was distributed via the University of Westminster student email and ‘Facebook’ social platform. To maximise the number of respondents, researchers have also shared the survey with friends from the University of Westminster. Respondents were also given an option to be included in the prize draw for one of 20 £10 Amazon vouchers to encourage students to take part.

Later on, the survey was shared on external platforms such as “SurveyCircle” and “SurveySwap” where it could be accessed by students outside the university. This deviation happened due to a struggle to acquire a large sample size, likely due to the survey being distributed at the end of the term and making it difficult to reach out to students. Later on, responses that originated from non-Westminster students were omitted.

Ethical guidelines were respected, including Informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw. All of this was explained to respondents in

the “Participation Information Sheet” (See ‘Appendix’ section) prior to the survey itself, allowing respondents to understand the aims and purpose of our study as well as their rights where the study is concerned, and where they can seek help in case of psychological distress.

The results were analysed in terms of percentage of respondents choosing each factor as limiting their interaction with the lecturer during the class, as well as their demographics and opinions towards OARS. To do this we equipped the analysis tool available on “SurveyMonkey” platform.

**RESULTS**

Out of 48 gathered responses, 14 were omitted from the final research report due to the uncertainty if they came from the actual students from universities since the survey was anonymous and accessible to anyone willing to take part. The remaining 34 responses came from the University of Westminster students, given that they submitted their university emails to us in to be included in the prize draw and answered ‘Yes’ to the question 37 ‘Are you a University of Westminster student?’.

Majority of the survey respondents were Undergraduate (67% of respondents) Full-time (94% of respondents) students. The survey was completed by at least one student from each of the University of Westminster schools, excluding the School of Finance and Accounting, suggesting that the results are representative of the students across various degrees.

According to survey respondents, the dominating factor accountable for the lack of student-lecturer communication during class was ‘Shyness’ with 64% of

respondents pointing out that it limited their willingness to speak up. The second factor was ‘Anxiety’ (61%). The remaining aforementioned factors that were hypothesised to prevent

students from speaking up during the class were deemed to be less important, with ‘Boredom’ and ‘Laziness’ accounting for 32%, ‘Extent of knowledge on topic discussed’ 47%, ‘Tiredness’ 20% and ‘Language barrier’ 35% (See Figure 1).

Question 8 was seeking to determine whether students think that they have enough opportunities available to address the lecturer during the class, which might be the reason for the lack of interaction instead of students’ personality attributes. The survey revealed that 70% of the University of Westminster students think that they do have enough opportunities to gain lecturer’s attention during the class. Some respondents explored the question further by commenting: *“They stick around at the end and pause a lot during lectures to let us think about questions*

*and ask us what we think”*. Some respondents’ responses were more ambiguous suggesting that the answer depends on circumstances:*” Yes, but depends on how big lecture is and if there is a given time”*. The remaining 30% of respondents answered by saying that they do not have enough opportunities to address the lecturer, with one respondent saying that: *“Certain people dominate the conversation”*. Such a statement implies that some students feel more confident than others resulting in a class participation division, where more confident students outshine those who are shy, even if the shy students have a lot to say on the topic discussed and wish to participate.

Question 33 asked respondents to answer on a 10-point scale *“How likely would you be to express yourself during the class anonymously via an online audience response system?”*. The mean response across respondents was 6, suggesting that more than half of respondents think that an online audience response system would help them to communicate with the lecturer more freely. Question 36 asked, *“Do you think that an online audience response system would benefit the future classes?”*. 23 out of 34 students unambiguously agreed that an online audience response system would indeed benefit the future classes: *“Yes definitely. It will allow people who suffer from anxiety or just shyness to voice their opinions and ask questions they need the answers to. It might even get them better grades from getting a better understanding from the lecturer from the questions they asked without having to be nervous or embarrassed”*. According to another respondent, OARS would be useful due to its anonymity: *“Yes - gives people the opportunity to share and opens up discussion especially when dealing with sensitive issues”*. Another student commented: *“Could be easier to express my opinions in class.”*. 8 out of 34 students

were undecided, by suggesting a few reasons why it may or may not be helpful: *“Maybe for foreign students”*, *“It is less personal, but anonymous so I guess*

*good and bad at the same time”*, and *“It could be a good idea on the short run, but eventually students need to develop the confidence to ask because they will need it in the workplace”*.

**DISCUSSION**

The main limitation of this study was a small sample size. Out of 100 expected responses we were only able to collect 48, out of which 14 were omitted due to its unclear origins. Thus, it is difficult to ensure that results are representative for the whole university population bearing in mind that only a small proportion of university students have taken part in this study. It is most likely that this problem was encountered due to the survey being shared at the end of the second term when majority of students leave for holidays and rarely check their emails which was the main tool of sharing the survey. The questionnaire was also sent out to the course leaders in hope that they could share the survey with their students, however the end of second term was a busy period of paper marking, straining course leaders’ time available for contacting the students.

It may be difficult to generalise findings to the rest of university population due to 73% of respondents being female which makes our results biased on gender. It is possible that an equal male-female participant ratio would produce different results given that males encounter the struggle of student-lecturer communication due to different reasons.

The strength of this study was that data was successfully obtained from all years of study, including Postgraduate level (See Table 2). This fact allows us to be more

confident that the results are representative across the university students of all year, and shyness limits students’ willingness to raise a hand regardless of their level of study.

Negative influence of the shyness factor on the student-lecturer in-class interaction is supported by research literature in addition to our results. Research by Stowell et al. (2010) studied Electronic Student Response System’s (ESRS) usefulness to fight shyness and conformity in 128 psychology students. For the purpose, researchers asked students to answer 50 controversial questions by either speaking up during the class or by using the ESRS anonymously. The study revealed that there was significantly greater variability in students’ responses in the ESRS condition compared to the hand-raising condition. Furthermore, participants’ measure of shyness positively correlated with negative emotions after the class and their SRS preference over hand-raising. This indicates that students are more likely to give truthful answers anonymously and are less likely to conform to the general opinion in the class, which in turn could lead to a more

attentive class discussion and lessened fear of peer rejection.

In addition to these benefits, Bartsch & Murphy (2011) reviewed studies on this topic and argued that usage of ESRS also increases student engagement it the class, prevents passive learning and improves student and instructor feedback. Given that students are aware that a question

might be asked any time, they tend to listen to the lecturer more vigilantly than

in a normal class setting in the absence of ESRS (Ulrich, 2006). Another study conducted by Hatch et al. (2005) revealed that 92% of students agreed that ESRS aided them in understanding their strengths and weaknesses of the topic discussed in the class. This means that students who were given an option of using ESRS were more equipped to determine how to improve their understanding of the concepts taught in the class, increasing the likelihood of higher grades. In line with the study, lecturers also received benefits associated with ESRS, including a better understanding of what students understand well and which concepts need further explanation (Hines, 2005). This kind of benefit can only be gained by student feedback, which is sometimes difficult to obtain, especially during the class when a lecturer is asking a question and receives few to no answers from the students’ audience.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The key message of this study was that the University of Westminster respondents agreed that shyness indeed limited their willingness to address the lecturer during the class, whether that would be answering questions posed by the instructor, asking for clarification of a concept or elaborating on the topic. Since lecturers are an important source of information available to the students, improving communication

between students and lecturers is vital in the University of Westminster. In the light of our findings and background literature in support of it, we would highly recommend the course leaders to consider implementing OARS into the teaching routine.

**DISSEMINNATION**

Bearing in mind the nature of this study and its results, the team have approached an agreement that these findings should be directed towards course leaders and lecturers of the University of Westminster.

The reason for this is because we believe that course leaders and lecturers are the best informed on the students’ performance and feedback of the course. Therefore, they are the best equipped to decide if indeed OARS would benefit the University of Westminster students in practice. Such a decision should be based on their observations of the class participation and whether they think that communication between lecturer and students is strained.

**APPENDIXES**

PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of Study:** Student and lecturer in the connected age

**Researchers:** Monika Draseikaite and Peri Chiu

**Supervisor:** Dr Liz Sage

You are being invited to take part in a research study that assesses students’ interaction with lecturer during the class. This study involves collecting data to indicate what reasons inhibit students’ willingness to ask for clarification from the lecturer or express their thoughts about the study topic during lectures or seminars. Insight into the reasons why some students rarely address the lecturer during the class would suggest how to improve student-lecturer communication and thus how learning experience could be enhanced in the University of Westminster.

This research is being undertaken as part of the Students as Co-Creators project.

If you wish to participate, the study will involve you in an online survey which takes around 10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to fill out a questionnaire, that will consist of a series of questions regarding your classroom participation, as well as some information about yourself, such as your age, gender, level of study and the school you are in.

To express our gratitude for your time, we would like to include you in a prize draw for 1 our of 20 £10 Amazon vouchers. If you would like to be included in the prize draw, please tick the box bellow and leave your email in the space provided.

**Please note:**

* Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.
* You have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
* You have the right to ask for your data to be withdrawn as long as this is practical, and for personal information to be destroyed.
* You do not have to answer particular questions either on questionnaires or in interviews if you do not wish to do so.
* Your responses will normally be made anonymous, unless indicated above to the contrary, and will be kept confidential unless you provide explicit consent to do otherwise, for example, the use of your image from photographs and/or video recordings.
* No individuals should be identifiable from any collated data, written report of the research, or any publications arising from it.
* All computer data files will be encrypted and password protected. The researcher will keep files in a secure place and will comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation.
* All hard copy documents, e.g. consent forms, completed questionnaires, etc. will be kept securely and in a locked cupboard, wherever possible on University premises.
* Documents may be scanned and stored electronically. This may be done to enable secure transmission of data to the university’s secure computer systems.
* If you wish you, can receive information on the results of the research. Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive this information.
* The student partners can be contacted during and after participation by email ([w1712610@my.westminster.ac.uk](mailto:w1712610@my.westminster.ac.uk), [w1497125@my.westminster.ac.uk](mailto:w1497125@my.westminster.ac.uk))
* If you have any concerns about your experience of taking part in the research, you can contact the academic partner Dr Liz Sage by e-mail [L.Sage@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:L.Sage@westminster.ac.uk)
* If you want to know more about the Students as Co-Creators programme, you can contact Studentpartnership@westminster.ac.uk

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