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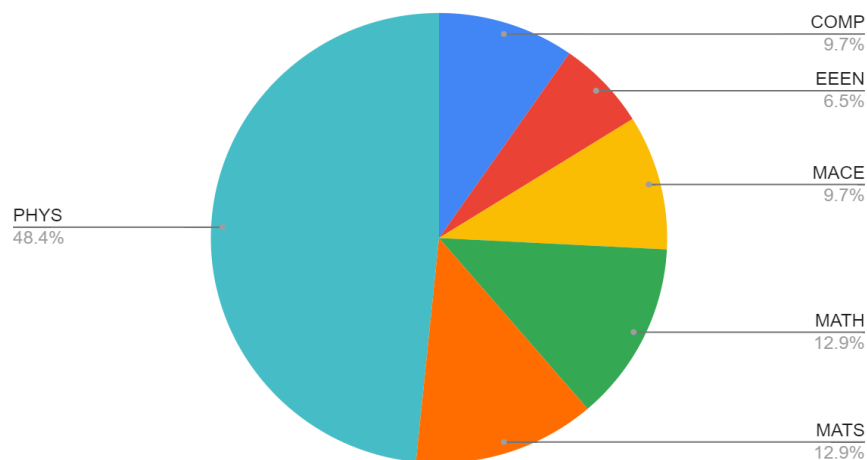
Piazza: Online Engagement Survey Report

Introduction

As the teaching and learning community migrated to a fully online experience over the past year, the need for effective, user friendly online engagement tools has increased. In light of a number of faculty staff choosing [Piazza](#) (a collaborative question and answer platform) over the discussion tools currently available in Blackboard, a survey was sent out to gauge the opinion and experience of users; the aim being to understand why users preferred this system over the inbuilt discussion forum options and to help inform the decision whether to continue a university site license for the software.

Piazza was rolled out under temporary license and used by approximately 35 FSE academics across 31 course units. Looking at usage across departments, course units from Physics and Astronomy made up almost half of users, with Mathematics and Materials following as can be seen in the chart below.

Percentage Piazza Users Across Departments



Summary

Of the 35 academics who were sent the survey, we received 15 individual responses. Participants were asked six questions, the main themes and key points from each question are summarised below. For the full answers to each question see page 5.

NOTE: One participant answered the first two questions, and then stated that they initially set up Piazza, but decided to use Teams instead.

Why did you choose Piazza over Blackboard Discussion Boards?

- Latex functionality / TeX formatting
- Better support of mathematics
- Polls / Anonymous questions
- Student collaboration on answers
- Ease of use
- Students engage more than when using Blackboard

What features did you find most useful as an instructor?

- Latex
- Anonymous questions
- Polls
- Student-to-student answers
- Q&A endorsement
- Comment threads by course module
- User friendly interface
- Integration with Blackboard
- Fast interaction / Use in live sessions as well as asynchronous
- Email notifications

How did your students engage in the forums - what did they interact with most and were there aspects you wanted them to engage in more or that they seemed hesitant to engage with?

- Support needed to encourage more peer interaction
- Lots of instructor-student interaction
- Students engaged with online polls
- Students engaged during live sessions
- Anonymous posting increased engagement
- GTA's play major role in response time and good communication with students
- Better user experience than Blackboard Discussion
- Issues with students signing up (*this is a training issue as there are options to enrol your students onto Piazza forums*)

What major issues did you come up against when using Piazza?

- Nothing
- Students signing up / enabling notifications

What do you and/or your students require to help increase the effectiveness of online collaborative tools such as Piazza?

- Better integration with Blackboard
- Customisation
- Unrestricted license
- Training for students and staff
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Would you like to continue using Piazza with future course units?

- Yes

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- Absolutely
 - Undecided / Prefer to have Teams integrated in Blackboard

Conclusion

The overall response was very positive and the majority of respondents want to continue using Piazza. There is a clear need for training on the software, for both students and staff. Some of the issues highlighted by instructors such as integration and student enrollment can be solved with training. Many recognised the lack of peer-peer interaction. This could be down to students not feeling comfortable or confident using certain methods such as group answers, so training for students in the form of an 'Online Collaboration Guide' outlining best practice when using online Q&A tools, as well as a short video on how to use Piazza may help solve some of these issues. The overall response showed that instructors and students preferred Piazza over Blackboard discussion boards due to the more user friendly interface and richer variety of tools. The mathematical functions prove very popular, and are an important tool to allow for clear and effective communication about specialised topics. The topic of anonymous questions is an interesting one as it is clearly increasing engagement, however from an 'online etiquette' and best practice for online collaboration perspective, it may make peer-peer interaction more difficult if individuals do not know who they are talking to.

The outcome of this report is to support a Piazza site license for the University, and to further support FSE staff and students with its use via training and targeted help guides.

1. Why did you choose Piazza over Blackboard Discussion Boards?

Functionality

'Ease of embedding maths in posts; question and answer format'

'Latex functionality. And lightweight.'

'Feedback from colleagues from other universities; a variety of features not available in Blackboard, including better support of Mathematics'

'TeX formatting, code formatting and email notifications'

'polls, anonymous questions'

'Students didn't make much use of the Blackboard Discussion Boards last year. With a large group (192) and blended learning which posed discussion questions each week, we were attracted to Piazza because it allowed students to collaborate on an answer.'

'Better UI, better functionality, looks slicker'

User experience

'Piazza is much easier to use and has a modern design. Blackboard discussion boards are clunky and awkward to use'

'It was recommended by one of the Teaching College videos and it proved to be a very useful tool'

'Blackboard is very poor, awkward and complicated to use as manager of the course and user.'

'students were using for other courses and enjoyed it'

Accessibility

'I wanted an enhanced discussion board. I was choosing between Piazza, Teams, Discord. Piazza won because it is already integrated in Blackboard (Teams is not) and is available in China (Discord is not)'

Other

'As an experiment. To see if it is good.'

'better according to word of mouth'

2. What features did you find most useful as an instructor?

Specific functions

'LaTeX input for maths; ability of students to post anonymously; polls'

'anonymous Q&A and polls; student-to-student answers; good question and answer endorsement'

'Question and answer style format, easy to link to other questions, easy to add latex equations. Polls.'

'Comment threads by course module, LaTeX integration is VERY useful.'

'Latex formulae. The interface.'

'Latex support, anonymity of posts'

'TeX formatting, code formatting, email notifications'

'Anonymity'

'Anonymous questions'

Integration

'It was already embedded in the course Bb page and didn't require much work to use it during lectures.'

User experience

'The platform in general was very useful. It played a key part in the delivery of Fluids 1 to ~400 UG students. I used it both as part of the live sessions (live Q&A/Polls) and to support the async learning, supported by a team of GTAs. The ability for students to post anonymously and to answer/upvote each other's questions was very useful.'

'Ease of getting to the relevant posts.'

'Email notifications, the interface/view which allowed you to quickly see where posts needed a response, the ability to have both private messages and public posts in one place.'

'fast interaction -- sometimes real time'

3. How did your students engage in the forums - what did they interact with most and were there aspects you wanted them to engage in more or that they seemed hesitant to engage with?

'Students mainly posted questions aimed at the lecturer. I would have liked them to try to answer each other's questions more.'

'Students interacted in various ways: (1) During lectures using online polls, (2) posing questions to the lecturers & GTAs about things they didn't understand in the course, etc. The GTAs were really fast in replying which incentivised the students to use Piazza because they knew they would get an answer reasonably quickly.'

'The students left overwhelmingly positive feedback. They liked the availability of support at their fingertips. The system is more light-weight and responsive than Blackboard and many engaged with Piazza more than with the Blackboard. Use during live (synchronous sessions) made possible prior interaction and follow-up.'

'There were plenty of questions posted, and quite a few cases where students answered each other's questions. They didn't engage much with the Live Q&A, rather asking questions in zoom chat.'

'there was a core usage of around 100 students per day and over the semester there were almost 3000 individual contributions from students and GTAs. The live Q/A enabled students to work interactively and I was able to respond to some of the answers posted in real time.'

'First, a fair fraction did not sign up to it, despite my begging. Those who did, used it to ask questions about the content and the infrastructure of the course. They did help each other, but not that much.'

'Some students were more active than others. They didn't use the collaborative "student answer" as much as would have liked, preferring to post their own answers. There was some interaction between them when asking questions (eg: about coursework). Most preferred to post anonymously and a few preferred private posts. I would have liked more collaboration and interaction between them, but I think that this could be achieved with a little more training upfront.'

'Around 10% of the class made posts. Would be good to get user-level metrics to measure engagement (pages visited, time on site, user clicks, number of posts etc.)'

'direct answers to their questions'

'Had over 600 student posts I think. Was popular and useful.'

'Students asked anonymous questions to me but did not really chat to each other. I wanted more of a discussion to develop.'

'They posted far more frequently than on BB forums previously. This is due to anonymous posting. The vast majority of interactions are instructor-student rather than student-student which I would have liked to have seen more of.'

'they asked tons of questions anonymously.'

'Engagement is mixed. This is a Blended teaching issue in general, rather than specifically to do with Piazza. I would have hoped to have seen more questions being answered by peers (which then can be endorsed by instructors). This would have helped in learning.'

4. What major issues did you come up against when using Piazza?

'None' (x4)

'No major issues'

nothing comes to mind. It is now behind a paywall, otherwise we would also have used it for our sem 2 module. As it stands we had to use the Blackboard forum and it has hardly been used.'

'Nothing major, but some students still find it less preferable to a direct email. Also, reminding the students to engage with the platform and to monitor it is an additional time commitment.'

'None - but I think students sometimes got confused about where to post answers (as a student answer, as responses to the student answer or as new threads)'

None. Being able to sign on a class by using a block of email addresses was really handy.

'At the beginning of the semester, Piazza was lacking structure which meant it appeared messy for both staff and students. The feature of folders and subfolders was introduced later in Semester 1 which helped.'

'Two issues. First, as mentioned above, not all students sign up for it. With BB Discussion Forums, not all sign up for notifications, so it is no different. It is a deadend; you cannot get back to BB from it.'

"The need for students to enrol themselves on it separately.'

'It feels intrusive as an academic. It felt like students were expecting responses late at night on weekends.'

'Copying a post from an old class did not work. Piazza technical support fixed it within 1 day of me raising the issue.'

5. What do you and/or your students require to help increase the effectiveness of online collaborative tools such as Piazza?

'I can't think of anything.'

'Make it easier to customise so that the Discussion Board appears easy to navigate for both staff and students.'

'Better integration with Blackboard (e.g. auto-enrollment of all the students in the unit)'

'Perhaps better integration with live video tools, or better integration with the course unit structure on blackboard.'

'we would need an unrestricted licence, as per what was available in sem 1'

'Maybe we need to sell it harder so more would sign in.'

'A little more training (eg: how to collaborate on answers for students) how to set good (collaborative) discussion questions (for staff).'

'Longer-form LaTeX integration would be nice, such as being able to post LaTeX blocks of codes and to read in packages. Would be great to be able to post problem sheets and solutions.'

'make available prior to course and announce to all'

'It worked well. The lightweight feel is good (as opposed to more heavyweight/monolithic tools from Microsoft)'

'The more integrated they are the better, and particularly if multiple courses are available from the same platform without having to log in and out'

'Automatic student enrollment onto Piazza (colleagues expect students to do this themselves). Many students do not currently feel part of the University community and there is a misguided 'us v them' atmosphere, this hinders more open

discussions. The University must learn from mistakes made last year to prevent this in future.'

'Nothing particularly.'

'I'd like some students to engage more. Not all students engage well. Some do.'

6. Would you like to continue using Piazza with future course units?

'Yes' (x7)

'yes, definitely'

'Absolutely.'

'Absolutely, in particular for large units, where it is the only way to properly engage with the students.'

'Undecided. Some of the co-teachers on my courses don't prefer it.'

'Up to a point. I would prefer to have Teams integrated in Blackboard.'

'Yes, definitely. Piazza now allows for code snippets to be run.'