A fresh take on student engagement

Coventry University and Aula
https://aula.education

Coventry University wants to overturn received wisdom on how to achieve student engagement through social learning. A review of the market showed that none of the established providers of learning management systems and virtual learning environments (VLEs) offered services that could deliver this vision. For this reason the university has set out on a pilot of edtech startup Aula’s communication platform.

Aula’s solution enables academics and lecturers to get closer to students and break down barriers that can hinder stimulating conversations. Like Coventry University, Aula’s founders believe that conversational technology will have a huge impact on engagement in an academic context; it has already revolutionised the workplace. And the Aula team is in a good position to know what engagement now looks like – the founders were all recent graduates when they set up the startup in 2015 and they’ve been working on keeping their vision current ever since.

Coventry University’s pilot started in June 2018, intending to help in shaping a completely new solution. It is being evaluated as an alternative to the current VLE.

At the start of the 2018-19 year, 80 students in three programmes were migrated to Aula, increasing to 1000+ students across at least 20 programmes over the next few months. The project leads have fortnightly meetings about progress and preliminary results, and the Coventry University project lead and pilot participants (including students, academics, course leaders) give regular feedback. Results from the first academic term show the platform has strong support from teaching staff and students alike, with the vast majority of staff in the pilot saying Aula connected them better and more easily to other staff and students than the VLE, and was more enjoyable to use.

Simon Launder says the pilot is helping to remove obstacles to working with the startup, if that’s what the university decides to do longer term:

“Most universities have a VLE but often these haven’t evolved to keep pace with changes in the ways students live,” said Simon Launder, deputy chief digital information officer at Coventry University. “Aula’s platform is unique in bringing content into the conversation and providing dedicated spaces that support active learning communities.”

“Like any university we have regulations and processes that can present a challenge when working with young businesses so we have to prove the value of what we’re doing – the university’s due diligence processes would be likely to flag a startup as risky, especially when..."
it’s offering something that would sit centrally within our teaching and learning systems."

“Undertaking pilots enables us to develop a business case and, once that’s done, we can work on ways to make sure the startup is able to navigate its way through established procurement processes in fair, levelled competition with established edtech providers.”

Aula co-founder and CEO Anders Krohn says the Aula system is unique because it focuses on communication and interaction to make it easy for staff and students to talk to each other and collaborate in real time. This, he says, has positive impacts on attainment and mental wellbeing:

“Collaboration platforms are well proven in business settings and we’ve developed our own solution, geared to the needs of education with pedagogy at its core.”

“We’re in multi-stage pilots with a number of universities and each project remains a pilot until there’s wide buy-in to phase out the learning management system in favour of a communication platform. If that doesn’t happen, the university can walk away.”

Getting started with a startup
Simon Launder says it's refreshing working with startups because they are hungry to succeed; they want to be challenged so they can make their solution stronger:

“It’s like a breath of fresh air working with Aula. They’ve taken on the heavy lifting for us, handling inductions with staff and students and making sure it’s all seamless. Whatever we ask for, they make sure it happens.

"To anyone who’s thinking of working with a startup I’d say it really can be worth it. If you want to be innovative you have to accept some risk in the way that you view the edtech marketplace and your technology choices and, by starting with a partner approach to relationship development, you can build, test and adapt technology solutions to align closer to your own vision and pedagogy, rather than squeezing one into the other. This quickly highlights value and mitigates against any perceived risk.”

Aula is looking for universities to partner with on its next round of exploratory pilots, starting in September 2019.

Visit the Aula website for more details. https://aula.education