

Acadly: An Online Platform for Engaged Learning

Tiffany D. Kriz

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Acadly: An Online Platform for Engaged Learning

Tiffany D. Kriz

Department of Organizational Behaviour, Human Resources Management, and Management,
MacEwan University

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tiffany D. Kriz, Department of Organizational Behaviour, Human Resources, and Management, School of Business, MacEwan University, 10700-104 Avenue, 5-306O, Edmonton, AB T5J 4S2, Canada. Email:

Tiffany.Kriz@macewan.ca

Abstract

Faculty and students alike can benefit from the use of educational technology yet keeping up with the latest developments can pose a challenge for busy faculty. This article reviews one tool that could be used to facilitate teaching and learning in face-to-face, hybrid, or online courses. Acadly is an online platform and mobile application providing capabilities such as automated attendance, in-page discussion threads, and participation tracking. Acadly functions similar to learning management systems yet differs in ways that some faculty and students may find appealing. The article discusses the strengths and limitations of the tool based on usage in five sections of an undergraduate organizational behavior course. Acadly appears to be useful in helping students organize their work, and in facilitating greater student engagement. A notable limitation is that it currently lacks advanced grading capabilities.

Keywords: Acadly, educational technology, discussion threads, participation tracking, student engagement, automated attendance, learning management system, LMS

Acadly™: An Online Platform for Engaged Learning

Learning technologies can be used to leverage student learning by providing flexibility, alternative forms of engagement, and interactive forums between students. Thoughtful adoption of technology can be especially valuable for connecting with the current generation of traditional undergraduate students, who have learned using technology throughout their lives (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007). These students have more demands on their attention than previous generations, so it should come as no surprise that students seek well-organized courses (Sutherland et al., 2018), and technology that can help them keep up with their workload (Henderson et al., 2017). Yet the danger is that a focus on such instrumental concerns may draw attention away from practices promoting deep intellectual engagement (Sutherland et al., 2018). This article reviews Acadly™, a useful tool for meeting both objectives.¹

Resource Description

Acadly is a free online platform and mobile app designed to facilitate a “smart” classroom through features such as automated attendance, user-friendly discussion spaces, discussion-based word clouds, participation tracking, and polling. Acadly can be used in concert with a learning management system (LMS) or offered in place of one. Acadly’s business model is based on selling subscriptions to their upgraded service offering LMS integration at an enterprise level. Thus, the company does not allow advertisements nor sell user data².

Acadly is organized in a time-structured format, using a course timeline as the main landing page (see Figure 1). Each class session is further organized into pre-class activities and

¹ Acadly is a product of ACETONE Properties and related trademarks are retained by ACETONE Properties.

² For more information, see Acadly’s privacy policy: <https://acadly.com/privacy>

discussions, in-class activities and discussions, and post-class activities and discussions, as displayed in Figure 2.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Automated attendance is perhaps Acadly's most unique feature. This tool relies on both students and the instructor having the app installed on an iOS or Android device. Using mesh technology, the instructor clicks the button to record attendance, which sends a signal to other devices in the room to confirm attendance. Students who are in the room with an internet-connected, application-enabled device will be marked as present, whereas those not in class are marked as absent (or 'checked in' if they are connecting remotely). If needed, instructors can modify these records later. Through the app, students can check their attendance records at any time. Instructors can also easily view student attendance records and download them in CSV format for importing into a learning management system (e.g., Blackboard).

Discussion spaces are a big part of Acadly. Two types of discussion spaces exist: automatic discussion panels and instructor-created discussions. Every class, resource, poll, and quiz automatically contains a discussion panel where students can post in real-time with questions or have comments relevant to that particular class or activity. The instructor can also create discussion threads in a separate discussion space. Instructor-created discussions offer a 'contribute to consume' option and are counted separately in participation tracking versus those that students initiate within the system's default discussion panels. Figure 3 illustrates an instructor-created discussion thread.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Instructors set up a class by entering the class schedule into the website, then populating content for each class session including any polls, videos, files, or quizzes students should access for that specific class. The instructor decides whether each activity should be completed during class or before class. Activities placed into the pre-class section are launched automatically at the designated time. If an activity is placed into the in-class section, the instructor launches it by clicking ‘publish’ for that activity at the desired time. Activity options include quizzes, polls (anonymous or non-anonymous), instructor-initiated discussions, and resources (can be text, file, video, or web links). Beyond these activities corresponding to specific classes, instructors may also post assignments for students to complete by chosen due dates.

Within each class session, the instructor launches tools from the app (e.g., automated attendance, quizzes, polls) whenever they are needed. Students must be able to connect to Acadly to complete each activity. During and after class, students can use the query option to submit questions, or otherwise use the discussion function to share relevant thoughts or questions. Normally, queries are visible to the entire class. However, a student may elect to submit a query anonymously – these anonymous queries are not visible to the class until approved by the instructor.

Students can enroll in the Acadly class either by following the invitation that is generated when the instructor uploads a class roster or by using an enrollment code provided by the instructor. After the course is over, the instructor is prompted to archive the course.

Use in the Classroom

I used Acadly in teaching five sections of a third-year undergraduate Managerial Skill Development course. Two recent changes in the course had prompted me to search for complementary technology. First, I implemented a flipped-classroom approach, such that class time was used for active engagement with content, whereas the basic content delivery was moved outside of class time (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Second, I incentivized participation in class activities, which introduced the need for consistently and transparently tracking various means of participation, including attendance. Acadly was chosen for its ability to complement these changes. Further, it appeared promising for its ability to enable rapid student-student and student-professor dialogue, which can help students stay engaged when accessing materials in an online environment (Dixson, 2010).

Flipped Class

Students were responsible for familiarizing themselves with content before class. Toward this end, I created mini-lecture videos, uploaded those to a private YouTube channel, then embedded those videos into the relevant pre-class activity placeholders in Acadly. When students opened the Acadly app, they saw the class timeline, where the upcoming class session was prominently featured. From there, they could find any activities they needed to complete before class in the 'Pre-class activities' section. Pre-class activities usually included watching a mini-lecture and responding anonymously to a self-assessment poll tied to the reading. Then, during class time, students took a short content-related quiz through Acadly based on the assigned content. This gave me a chance to gauge their understanding of the material before launching into an in-depth in-person activity related to that material.

Participation Tracking

I required students to watch the mini-lecture video before class, but the other pre-class activities were optional, counting toward a student's ongoing participation. Acadly allowed me to track a variety of participation methods quickly and transparently, including attendance. Students could click on their analytics within Acadly to track their points, and I could download this data into a spreadsheet, as needed.

Discussion and Communication

Beyond organizing resources by class and tracking participation, we also used the Acadly platform to maintain communication. Acadly has a built-in discussion panel that automatically appears at the side of every class session and resource. Students used this function to start discussions specific to that particular class session or resource. For example, if a student had a question about a poll, they could post their question right next to the poll without navigating to a new page. This question would show up automatically to others viewing the poll, so they could easily join the discussion. If other students had the same question or comment, they could simply use the 'like' or 'thank' responses to indicate their agreement. This intuitive approach to discussions appeared to facilitate use by avoiding the barriers associated with more traditional LMS discussion forums (Lima et al., 2019). For students, built-in discussions offered a convenient way to voice reactions to course materials. On the instructor end, the increased discussion activity provided timely insight into issues students were struggling with, which I could then address by adding my own comments or by bringing these issues up during our in-class discussion. Further, the built-in discussion threads saved time by allowing me to quickly address student comments in a format that was automatically visible to the rest of the class, resulting in a reduction of redundant emails.

Beyond making use of these automatic discussion threads, I also manually created separate discussion threads as needed. For example, when each student team gave a presentation at the end of the semester, I made a live thread for that team in which other students could share their feedback for the team.

Analysis and Comparison

Acadly's closest competitors appear to be Top Hat^{TM3}, Socrative^{TM4}, Yellowdig^{TM5}, and Edmodo^{TM6}. Out of these, Acadly is the only free option developed specifically for higher education offering a combination of automated attendance, built-in discussion threads, polls and quizzes, video sharing, and participation tracking. Table 1 provides a comparison of platforms on these criteria; a fuller comparison is beyond the scope of this article.

Insert Table 1 about here

Strengths

One notable strength of Acadly is the overall organization and layout. Students provided feedback on the Acadly platform itself and commented frequently on its use as an organizational tool. One student commented, "I like using Acadly. It keeps me prepared for the upcoming classes and it's a great learning tool." Another wrote: "Used secondary site Acadly for little quizzes, polls, discussions, and videos. This was very helpful to make sure the class was all on the same page and you could check your learning."

³ Top Hat is a product of Tophatmonocle Corp.

⁴ Socrative is a product of Showbie Inc.

⁵ Yellowdig is a product of Six Deg, Inc.

⁶ Edmodo is a product of Edmodo, Inc.

Another strength of Acadly is the automatic discussion threads. Whereas student-initiated threads are available in other systems, they typically require activation by the instructor, and on the students' end, require navigating away from content, both of which may impede use. In contrast, Acadly has automatic threads for every class session and activity, each with the ability for students to like or thank other posts. This gave students more options to voice questions, concerns, comments, and personal experiences without the need to navigate away from the task at hand.

Limitations

While Acadly has many notable strengths, it is not without limitations. Most notably, the current version of Acadly is not prepared to deliver advanced assignment grading functionality. Whereas grading in other platforms can be facilitated through the use of rubrics, in-text comments, and summary comment areas, most of these advanced grading features are not yet available in Acadly. For this reason, I had students submit their main course assignments through Blackboard, while everything else was done in Acadly. Some students commented that they would prefer to use a single system.

Another limitation is that the automated attendance technology did not always work. For example, my Google Pixel phone would not work to trigger the auto attendance feature, causing me to bring a second phone for that purpose. Similarly, students would occasionally have an issue such that their phone was not recognized by the mesh technology, which necessitated making manual changes to the attendance roster after using the auto attendance feature. Likewise, I occasionally needed to offer a paper-based quiz for students who did not come prepared with a device to take the quiz in Acadly.

Conclusion

My experience with Acadly was mostly positive. I found that it helped students keep track of due dates and engaged them in new ways through the various discussion features. It also nicely aligned with my flipped-classroom design and the need for participation tracking. Students were generally happy to use the platform. However, my students indicated a preference for a single platform, and Acadly fell short when it came to current grading functionality. Regardless, I found enough benefits from Acadly's in-class features and intuitive layout to justify its continued use in concert with Blackboard – especially for courses in which I want to enable rapid content-specific interactivity, pre-class activities, or the transparent tracking of participation. Specifically, I found that Acadly's intuitive design helped students come into class more prepared, while the in-class features of the system motivated student engagement by enabling me to easily and transparently track attendance and reward participation. Instructors should carefully evaluate their own needs before choosing to adopt this tool. For more information, see Acadly's website: <https://www.acadly.com/>.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Table 1*Comparison Between Acadly and Similar Educational Technologies*

Criteria	Educational technology				
	Acadly™	Top Hat™	Socrative™	Yellowdig™	Edmodo™
Cost	Free (enterprise version also available)	Free for limited version (pro version \$30/student)	Free for limited version (one class; 50 or fewer students)	Starts at \$10/student	Free (premium version also available)
Developed for	Higher-ed	Higher-ed	K-12	Higher-ed	K-12
LMS integration	Available in enterprise version	Yes (paid version)	No	Yes	No
Automated attendance	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Discussion spaces	Dedicated thread for each activity	Faculty-created discussions	None	Similar to social media	Similar to social media
Polls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quizzes	Yes	Yes (paid version)	Yes	No	Yes
Video sharing	Yes (YouTube)	Yes (paid version)	No	Yes	Yes
Participation tracking	Yes	Yes (paid version)	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 1

Screenshot of Course Timeline

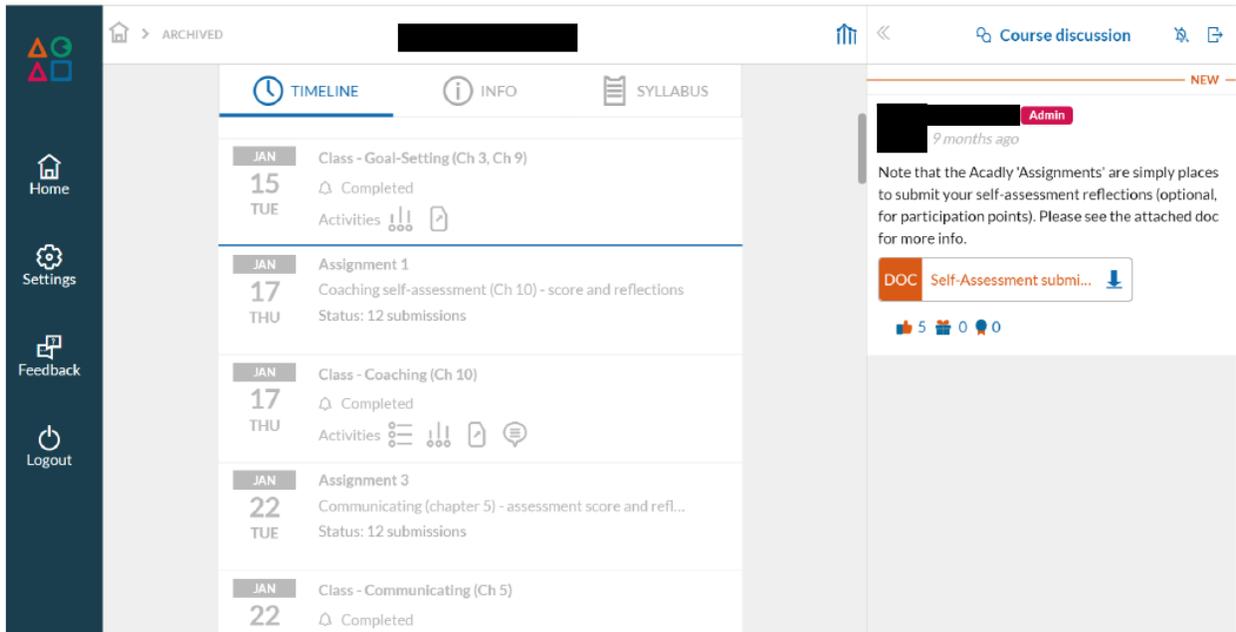


Figure 2

Screenshot of Activities within a Class Session

CLASS 07

ACTIVITIES	AGENDA	ATTENDANCE
PRE-CLASS ACTIVITIES		
 Resource 06 Teamwork mini-lecture		Accessed by: 29
 Poll 07 Teamwork self-assessment poll		Submissions: 23
IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES		
 Class started at 11:00 AM		
 Quiz 05 Teamwork quiz		Submissions: 31
 Class ended at 01:34 PM		
CLASS REVIEW		
 Summary		
POST CLASS QUERIES		
Queries that students may raise after the class will show up here.		

Figure 3

Screenshot of Instructor-Created Discussion Thread

