

[P2] Piloting forum activities into a nutrition and fitness module to support and enhance learning

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Background

To support the learning process of level two undergraduates in a nutrition-based module, the teaching team employed VLE forum activities relevant to the lecture topics. This study incorporates a 2006 cohort of learners who were unable to commit to lecture attendance and an ongoing 2007 group with frequent class attendance.

The E-learning scene

E-learning provides a strategy to widen participation, facilitate learning, enable logistical and sequential flexibility, increase enjoyment, improve communication and equip the learner with skills relevant for professional practice (DfES, 2003; Challis *et al*, 2003; Oblinger and Hawkins, 2005).

It has been proposed that discussion and sharing of experiences are considered two of the most effectual modes for adult learning (Brookfield, 1990; Brown and Duguid, 2000). This is particularly effective when applied contextually to a subject area that requires critical thinking hence incorporating Schon’s (1983) ideas of restructuring ‘what we believe, know and do’. With these ideas in mind, we utilised the university VLE forum and designed a setting with consideration of Salmon’s (2002) vital features for online activities:

- ‘spark’ or stimulus
- an activity for individual participation
- interactivity such as response to another’s post
- feedback from the moderator
- all necessary instruction to take part (Muirhead, 2002)

The 2006 pilot group explored the implementation of a carefully scaffolded forum into a conventional module to alleviate feelings of module detachment associated with distance

	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
Usefulness of the forum	100	0	0	0
Ease of use	33	66	0	0
Support to learning process	20	80	0	0
Usefulness of interaction with peers	33	66	0	0

Table 1: the evaluation of the forum by distance learners (expressed as a percentage of 6 learners)

learning. Owing to the success of the pilot, we have felt it impelling to employ the forum in the current year's group of full-time attendees.

Outcomes for 2006 group: the distance learners

For the 2006 group, forum activities were posted on a weekly basis (relevant to the content of the week's lectures) over a period of nine weeks. The forum tasks were discontinued after seven days and tutor feedback was provided along with the subsequent task.

The outcomes of the study were evaluated by the quality of the forum posts, the weekly progress of interactivity and discussion, and the content of student feedback via e-mail and questionnaire (**table 1**).

100% of the distance learners expressed a benefit from shared knowledge and collaborative learning. The study also supported Schon's theories of learning since the learners agreed to their use of reflective skills and of how their thoughts/ideas had been restructured by virtue of the forum debate. The quality of the posts demonstrated knowledge construction, application of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and personable changes within the learner. The distance learners also provided qualitative feedback such as '*I am finding the work really constructive and interesting*' and by the close of the module 80% conveyed an interest in using forum activities in future modules.

Preliminary results for 2007 group: week 4 of module

With regards to the preliminary results of our ongoing forum study, levels of participation have increased from 50% in week 1 (which accounts for latecomers and a 'settling-in' period) to 56% in week 3. When comparing the responses of the 2006 and 2007 groups, it is evident that 100% of the distance learners rate the usefulness of the forum as excellent (**table 1**) where as at the early stages of forum use in 2007, only 17% of the

	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
Usefulness of the forum	17	58	17	0
Ease of use	45	36	9	9
Support to learning process	27	55	18	0
Usefulness of interaction with peers	20	30	40	10

Table 2: the evaluation of the forum by full attendance learners (expressed as a percentage of 16 learners)

group consider the usefulness as excellent with 58% opting for good (**table 2**). Overall findings demonstrate that the distance learners selected only the categories excellent and good for all comments and full attendees distributed their responses in all four of the categories.

Feedback taken at week 4 in the module also informs us that nearly 63% of the 2007 group feel that they would be more likely to participate in the forum if they were undertaking a distance learning programme yet a significant 85% of the group assented to an interest in using forum activities in other modules.

Quality of forum debates

By collaborating with peers in a supported virtual learning environment, the learner has the benefit of collective critical reflections, an outcome that would be difficult to achieve without the use of a discussion-based activity (Naidu and Oliver, 1996). E-learning proffers an alternative learning route in constructivism, by allowing students to reflect on experience and undergo the resulting cognitive processing. The forum activities instigated the learner actively constructing new knowledge via perspectives, context given and peer interaction (Vygotsky, 1978 in Oliver and Herrington, 2003). By observing both the quality of the posts and responses provided, there was apparent active and constructive processing and it certainly seemed that learning was taking place.

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