

Empowering students to design an online activity: Case study

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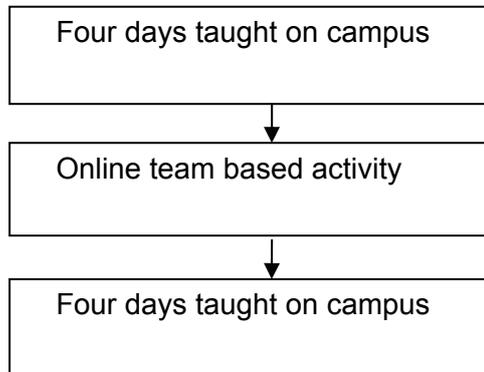
Abstract The presenter led a postgraduate module where students were on campus for a week, then away for 5 weeks then back for a week. These students were all in full time employment and had very demanding jobs. The aim was to ensure that the two weeks were linked in some way and that students continued to reflect and learn between the on-campus components, but accepting that their time for learning would be limited. Considering that adult students should be 'self-directing', the students were given the responsibility to decide what commitment they could give and how to use the discussion sites between on-campus sessions. This is a module entitled "Managing People in Healthcare" and one of the topics that were covered is the difficulty of communicating online (by email), where you don't have body language or the tone of voice to contextualise the language, so the task reinforced the content of the module.

The lecturer facilitated the students to decide how to use the sites, and initially made some suggestions, many of which were rejected by the students. They organised themselves into two teams and decided by a very democratic process, that each team would post a case that the other team had to solve, using what they had learned in the first week. They agreed ground rules and set up very high levels of commitment to the task. Their task was far more demanding than what the lecturer had considered. The lecturer set up group sites on the managed learning environment for the teams. The students all participated as they had agreed and were very active. On return to campus the students felt the process had been very worthwhile and a great learning opportunity. The lecturer had become largely an observer and occasional expert participant in the on-line discussion. The students returned to campus very familiar with the content of week one, and were well socialised and ready for the second week.

Data collected includes field notes, analysis of the group sites discussion, and the results of a questionnaire.

The module

The module was a 15 credit postgraduate module entitled Managing People in Healthcare. The students attended the University for two face-to-face Blocks, with a gap of five weeks between these taught blocks.



The module was blended from day one with the students having to download an article from StudyNet (UH MLE) between the first two days. Students were given one-to-one support to help them as required to get familiar with StudyNet.

All of these students were in full time employment, with very demanding work roles. I was concerned that the students would undertake the first week and then go back to work and the impetus and learning from the first week would not be consolidated, this would then impact on the second taught week. The idea of doing the online activity between the two taught components was:

- to consolidate what was taught in the first week and so then be ready to develop further in the second week
- to provide a social link to build a learning community
- to give the students the experience of the difference between working online and working face to face

Why empower?

These students were used to be self-directing, managing staff and their workload. I felt they were best placed to decide how much time they could commit to an online task and what would be most beneficial for their learning. I saw my role as a facilitator.

Blended from the start

The module used blended learning from the start which was essential to prepare students for the online task and was recognised by the students.

Student's quote:

“It was good that tasks were put onto StudyNet during the first on campus week so we were almost forced to confront our fears and use it and feedback problems in face to face contact”

The students were facilitated in a face-to-face session of approximately one hour to decide how to use the online activities. Initially, as the lecturer, I made some suggestions, always giving more than one option, but was delighted when these were largely rejected as the groups decided what they would do.

The Online task

The students chose to divide themselves into two groups using their inventory results for Belbin (<http://www.belbin.com/>) and Myers Briggs (<http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes1.htm>). This resulted in two teams. They then set ground rules, gave their teams names and decided on ground rules. They decided that each team would decide on a case that they would give to the other team to solve rather like management consultants. To get the ball rolling I would post a case for general comments on the discussion forum in the first week while the teams decided on their cases. This was a much more demanding task than I had envisaged.

I also set up group sites for each of the teams that gave them private areas to discuss. But they posted their case and solutions on the general discussion site. Both of the teams were facilitated to set ground rules through questions such as 'how often will you agree to log in?' Again they agreed highly demanding levels of participation. The task was therefore for the team to decide on a case for the other team and then solve the case posed by the other team. Following the online activity the discussion was brought back into the classroom. So this was a blended activity starting face-to-face, going out online and then coming back into the classroom.

The Online activity and evaluation

The students all participated, and where due to limitations of time they couldn't participate as they had originally agreed, they renegotiated their level of participation online. The level of activity and the quality of the discussion was very high, with strong use of the concepts and ideas taught in the first week as well as critical analysis and reflection on their own practice. There was however initially some anxiety as to if they were getting it right, although this rapidly dissipated in the supportive discussion.

Students' comments:

"Face to face teaching is my preferred learning environment, but I was surprised by how useful StudyNet was for discussion, it helped me to keep focused on the module and my learning between face to face blocks"

"Kept us thinking about theories between blocks"

"StudyNet is a very powerful tool"

"StudyNet was brilliant for keeping in contact and an efficient means of communication between taught weeks"

The students responded very positively. When the discussion was held back in the classroom I presented them with a print out of the scripts, and they discussed the difference between the online communications and face-to-face. Thus the concepts of the difference of communication by email and face-to-face were reinforced through their own experience. They also reflected on their roles and how they had participated. It was notable that they had strong team cohesion and were very mutually supportive, in particular openly discussing their personal strengths and areas for development. There was a high level of engagement.

Student's comments:

"Worked really well partly because there was a small element of competitiveness between teams"

"Deciding what we were going to do in advance meant we were all committed to the task"

"Everyone fully engaged in the learning"

This online activity had also enabled students to actively learn whilst undertaking their work. They came back to the second taught block ready to build on the first week.

Student's comments:

"Allowed learning that didn't require time off work"

"Good for student interaction we were not all local to Hatfield"

Analysis of the times of postings shows that the majority of postings were late in the evening or early before work. (See Figure 1)

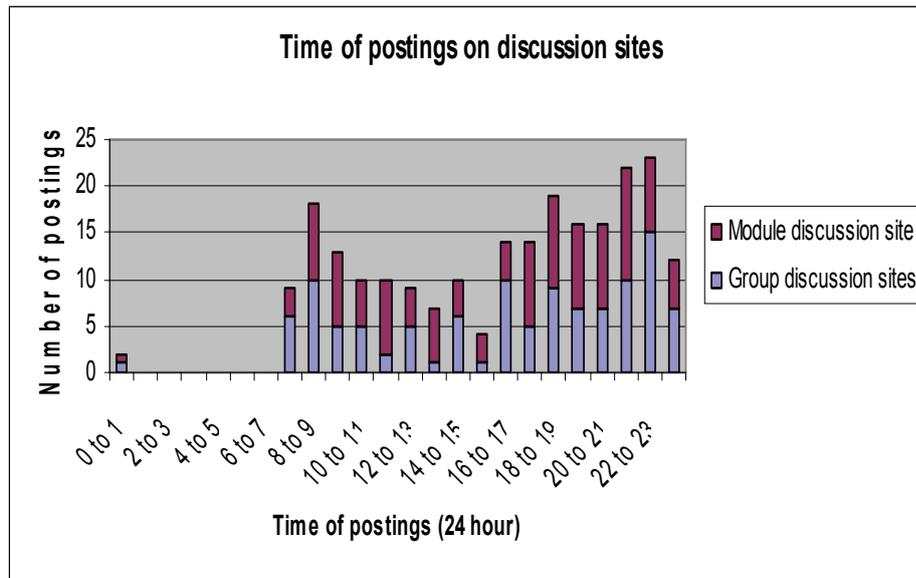


Figure 1 Analysis of the times of postings on the discussion sites

My role as a lecturer had been:

- To set up the group sites
- To give encouragement
- Provided schedules time for set up and debrief
- Involved in analysis of task and teams as a participant and then researcher

Key points

- Students were empowered in the task and method of undertaking it
- All students had socialised 'Face to Face' prior to go on the discussion site
- The task started in the classroom, went online and then came back into the classroom
- There was a clear task that supported collaborative learning

Conclusion

Using a Blended Learning Environment and empowering students to set the learning task, resulted in high levels of student engagement and collaborative learning.

Biography

Heather A. Thornton qualified in 1986 as a physiotherapist and then worked in the NHS until 1999. She specialised in the neurosciences, and health service management. Since moving into education in 2000 she has been interested in how to encourage students to take an active part in their learning and the use of group work. Heather became a University Teaching Fellow in November 2005 and is a BLU teacher.