

Notes from the Distance Learning Forum on 29.11.18

We had a series of lively discussions at this meeting, when we focused upon **student engagement online**, **encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning** and lastly, the University's **Adviser of studies handbook**.

(1) Student engagement online: how we do it and how we can do it better

We talked about some of the strengths and challenges of **tools used by attendees**, which included: WhatsApp, Skype, Padlet, WordPress, Mentimeter, Answer Garden, Collaborate and Collaborate Ultra, Panopto, Google docs for wikis. An LLC attendee reminded us about their 24 hour chat service which is a great success with distance learners.

It was noted that attendance at **online teaching sessions** is often low, but worth pursuing, not least since the recording can be a useful resource for all afterwards. We agreed that an hour is really too long for attendees to focus in an online teaching session and more frequent, shorter sessions are much preferable – for both students and tutors.

WhatsApp's encryption makes it a particularly attractive tool for some. The idea was mooted of a generic number for WhatsApp so that tutors would not need to use their own devices. There are security issues for some applications. Sometimes there can be challenges for students due to local firewalls and software issues.

We talked about those learners who perhaps prefer not to engage much; it can be difficult to tell if appropriate progress is being made. **BlackBoard statistics** can be useful for indicating students who have gone completely off radar!

Some shared learnings:

- **A few mandatory activities online** (e.g. on discussion boards or blogs) can be very useful, providing opportunities for formative assessment.
- **Switching off 'record'** for a period before the close of an online tutorial can make hitherto silent attendees suddenly become chatty!
- **Use of questions up on Padlet** for a week give students the opportunity to ask 'daft' questions anonymously
- Useful for staff **to allow students time to answer each other's questions** online, rather than stepping in to do this straight away: encourages students to be more self-sufficient, independent learners.

(2) Encouraging learners to take responsibility their own learning (a group discussion)

(a) Level of tutor engagement: does this change over the course of a programme?

Can be a roller coaster – a lot at start, then less, then more etc. Managing the student expectations can be a challenge. At resub stage, there's more individual feedback; pre assessment, there's more group support

Tutors should have a normal 'modus operandi' so that there's a consistency across a programme. Not only the quantity and speed of response is important, but also the quality: it is far better for tutors to take the necessary time to respond appropriately. We all agreed that taking time to compose a substantive email response to a student can mean they keep writing back for more of the same. Using a discussion board or blog is better, so that it's one answer to many, across the cohort.

We noted that for distance learners tutors are sometimes more tempted to participate in helping out, looking things up etc than we might in a face-to-face context and perhaps we should be less tempted to do that.

(b) Peer assessment: how to make the most of this

Peer assessment on one programme in Education and Social Work is included as an activity during induction on a blog; the participants all engage at different times, commenting on one another's postings. Sometimes learners find it difficult at the start, but once the peer reviewing activity is underway, everyone soon settles in. On another course, there is peer observation of teaching, with both of those involved reflecting on each other's experience: could possibly work at a distance?

In Medical Education there's a peer assessed formative; according to studies by Keith Topping, the benefits of peer assessment to the assessors are huge. It is important that students see that the exercise has value.

(c) How can we help students to see the value of participating online (rather than going straight for the assessment)?

We agreed it is useful for DL tutors to do a MOOC or similar online learning experience every now and then.

A discussion board activity that's assessed in some way ensures participation; online activity that builds into an assessment can be useful; likewise a formative that is securely linked to a summative. Demonstrate to learners that their experience can be of benefit to others in the class. Diversity in the student population improves experience immensely – lots of different experiences/knowledge to share. We watched [a video advertising Denmark's TV2](#) - which was a good visual reminder of the dangers in categorising people unhelpfully:

(d) How can we ensure student ownership of feedback?

How do we open students up to their feedback, making them think: I'm going to act on that! We can give feedback on a formative, then require students to explain how they've used the feedback to improve their summative submission. We can provide feed forward that'll help them to progress. Students can also be required to nominate the areas on which they wish feedback.

In induction students can be shown what the expectations in relation to feedback are, from the teaching and learning perspective. It's something to be acted upon!

We can ask students: is there anything you didn't understand about the feedback? This can be very useful for staff development.

(3) Adviser of studies discussion

We finished off with a short discussion about the Adviser of studies handbook. It is clear there are different models for the adviser role across distance learning programmes. We wondered whether the role was useful in the DL context and if the handbook was pertinent to this. We decided to return to this topic at a future DLF session. In the meantime, [the handbook is available here](#).

Next meeting: 5 March 2019, 14-16.00 hrs, Dalhousie 2S14

We look forward to seeing you there!

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