Using a Discussion Board for Group Discussions with International Distance Learners

Talking About... Learning and Teaching: Technology for Instruction Case Study 005

University of Birmingham

Programme of Study: International MScs in DL

Module: All modules

Discipline: International Development

Start Date: September 2005

Students: currently around 60/65 students p.a. across 2 programmes

Type: Distance

Technology: Discussion boards on WebCT

Approach: Enquiry-based learning (EBL), eLearning,

Learning Hours: 10-15 hours per week including reading time

Duration of Activity: at least one activity per week across each six week module

Indicative Moderation / Facilitation Hours: tutors expected to read and contribute where appropriate at least once per day

Assessment Link: Not formally assessed but strongly encouraged to participate

Rationale

As the students on these programmes are totally distance learners, spread around the world with some in countries undergoing post-war reconstruction, we had to have some way of creating engagement, and the tool is readily available on WebCT. The aim was to replicate the on-campus experience as much as it is possible to do in those circumstances.

Practice

Each six-week module is broken down into six units, and each unit has at least one discussion board activity. This could include a case study to work on; a combination of reading a journal article/book chapter/NGO report and a debate using questions posed by the tutor as a scaffold; or an exercise where students are asked to bring their experiences of a particular issue to the boards. All activities have a start date: some are open-ended and some have a definite finish date – dependent on the type of exercise used.

E-Learning Advantage

Including on-line group activity in DL programmes helps to reduce the 'distance'. Students bond within their groups and debate will always facilitate the learning process. Certain types of learners also need discussion in order to embed understanding. These DL students come from very interesting backgrounds and often have valuable experience to share with their peers – and, of course, the tutors.

Key Points for Effective Practice and Barriers

Relating the size of the discussion group to the task is important. If the task is an open-ended discussion, then larger groups (up to around 20) is possible. However, if the result of the task is to produce a presentation or reach a definite conclusion, then smaller groups (of, say, 5 to 8) are more viable. For role play, numbers will depend on the particular exercise. Always take into account that they will be students who do not participate and so be prepared to have to change the groupings for other tasks if you find that it is not working.

Globally spread students will be logging on at different times of the day/night, and in different time zones. Also, they may not log on every day (as they are usually working full time, often in very busy jobs). Therefore, give them enough time to engage in the discussions. If possible, allow them the opportunity to continue to engage in previous weeks' discussions – and try not to set more than one exercise per week (unless they are short ones).

Conclusion

Group discussions are an essential way to generate and reinforce student learning – but there has to be incentive for students to participate. At postgraduate level it is expected that students engage in debate but it is harder to do this at a distance. Those students who do engage do tend to do better in their assignments than those who do not – and this is impressed upon them from the beginning. Discussion board activity can be made part of summative assessment but it is difficult to mark and might disadvantage students who genuinely have a problem with accessing the boards (workloads, technical problems).

Showcase: Case Study Discussion Board Exercises

This module is a very practical one. It guides the students through the process of planning, analysis and delivery of small scale development projects.

Each week, students are given two case study exercises to do (one easy and one more advanced – the former being compulsory and the latter optional). These case studies address different aspects of the project cycle, building up to a complete process by the end of the module. As part of this module involves the use of spreadsheets and some maths (budget forecasting, etc.), and the case studies help students to get to grips with this, students are strongly encouraged to undertake these activities. They are not formally assessed and therefore students cannot be forced to do so. However, the final case study is a practice for their summative assessment. This gives them the opportunity to rehearse skills and get feedback before the real assignment. This is definitely an incentive to participate!

The 'easy' exercises are invented, although based on real life projects. The 'advanced' ones are genuine projects which are used to illustrate how things are done in reality. The exercises will be taken from different continents – to engage the range of nationalities undertaking the module.   They will also illustrate concepts covered in other parts of the degree programme, to help consolidate student understanding.

As an example, the easy exercise in Week 1 is a Rural Sector Survey which has been prepared by a team of consultants. The objective of the study was to survey the rural sector of the relatively undeveloped San Miguel district with a view to identifying potential projects for public investment.

The students are asked to read through the study carefully and then, on the basis of the material it contains, to identify three project ideas which are worth developing further, and to try to fill out some details for one idea (for example, if there looks as if a cooperative might be established, what would the enterprise produce and what might be its markets). This survey is typical of the sector surveys often carried out by governments or agencies as a first step in identifying projects.

They then spend a week on the discussion boards, with the tutor commenting on the points raised in the discussions, and offering prompts to further thought where necessary. At the beginning of the following week and the start of the next exercise, the 'solution' to the exercise is time released onto the discussion boards.

Programme of Study: Distance

Module: Introduction to Development Projects

Discipline: International Development

Start Date: 2006

Students: around 30 – 35 p.a.

Type: Distance

Technology: WebCT and the Net

Approach: Enquiry-based learning, group work

Learning environment: Online case studies; online asynchronous discussions.

Design Team: Dr J R Watson (module convenor and tutor); and Linda Curry (e-learning manager)

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