



The use of Facebook and Blackboard online discussion forums to support students' summative assignment preparation

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Introduction

An end of year programme evaluation, revealed inefficiencies and variability associated with how physiotherapy students were supported with summative assignment preparation. Identified problems included: tutors answering the same question multiple times; students receiving conflicting advice from different tutors; and inequity in the amount of guidance individual students received.

Online discussion boards are purported to increase student collaboration, satisfaction and engagement (JISC 2008); and were therefore explored as a method of assignment support. This cohort currently uses Blackboard as their virtual learning environment; however, Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in the UK (Ofcom 2014) and has been used to facilitate active learning in higher education (Prescott 2014). Little research has investigated the use of online discussion boards for assignment support, and no research has evaluated the potential benefit of Facebook in this area.

Aim

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Do students engage with an online discussion forum for assignment support?
2. Is an online discussion forum an acceptable method of supporting students with assignment preparation?
3. Do students prefer Blackboard or Facebook as a platform for an online discussion board?

Method

A mixed-methods action research approach was used. Students were given access to identical discussion boards on Facebook and Blackboard. The discussion boards were evaluated via a questionnaire and a focus group. Participants were recruited from a cohort of sixteen 2nd year Physiotherapy students at the University of Worcester.

Results

13 questionnaires were completed, a response rate of 81%;

- 92% of students engaged with the discussion boards
- 54% actively engaged and posted questions
- 100% felt their questions had been satisfactory answered
- 100% felt the discussion boards were useful and that they should be used to support future assignments
- Facebook was the most frequently utilized platform, used by 39% of students; 23% used Blackboard and 31% reported using both.
- Students who used both boards unanimously preferred Facebook as a platform

Thematic analysis of focus group data revealed 5 main themes:

Functionality

"I kind of prefer Facebook because like the persons name's there and there's a little picture of them and it just feels a bit more (personal)..."

Privacy and Professionalism

"I don't particularly want lecturers to see everything (on Facebook)...not that there's anything improper on my behalf but just pictures with family and things I don't really feel that's appropriate for lecturers to be seeing..."

Self Image

"....if I'm writing a question there could be some people saying to each other 'oh my god, I can't believe that she's asked this' or 'is she stupid?'"

Meeting Students needs

".... (on making discussion boards compulsory) University is supposed to be independent.....if you haven't got your own sort of motivation to do it you shouldn't have it forced upon you because it's your own choice at the end of the day"

Collaboration

"We have a group of friends and we are happy to share references between us...because we know we all work hard whereas I wouldn't share an article that I'd spent half an hour trying to look for on Facebook, for someone to then just be like 'Oh I've done no work, yes, I'll take that, I'll have that thank you very much!'"

Conclusions

- Discussion boards are a useful tool for supporting assignment preparation; which students value for their speed, convenience and informality.
- Students should be offered choice in how their assignment preparation is supported; discussion boards should not be offered as the sole form of assignment support as they may exclude less confident students or those anxious about their social identity.
- Although discussion boards may provide a potential platform for student collaboration, this does not happen automatically. Further research is required to investigate how student collaboration and critical discussion can be facilitated, without making boards compulsory.
- The choice of platform needs careful consideration when planning discussion boards. Facebook may offer superior functionality and may have the potential to foster a sense of community among learners; however privacy and professionalism must be considered on professional courses.

References

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