

Using discussion boards as a means of engaging learners

Overview

Information literacy and e-learning research shows that it is possible to engage students in detailed aspects of a topic area when the appropriate tasks (involving active, scaffolded, collaborative and reflective learning), settings (within a subject module) and assessments (task based with evaluation and reflection) are used (Walton et al. 2007a and b). Furthermore, this learner engagement can lead to high level critical thinking (Hepworth & Walton, 2009; Pope & Walton, 2009; Walton 2010). Using these principles Online Social Network Learning (OSNL) enables students to produce written material which is captured online and made available to all learners. Access can be gained any time and participation is equal (enabling students who would not normally take part in face-to-face discussion an alternative way of contributing).

This OSNL approach has been used in a number of settings. This case study focuses on a Sport and Exercise year one undergraduate core module Research and Professional Development at Staffordshire University and the OSNL activity peer assessment in particular. Instructions for OSNL exercises were devised following recommendations by the Plain English Campaign. Discourse was managed following Salmon's guidelines (2002; 2004).

In brief the activity was set up in the following way. During induction week students were required to write a 500 word essay on a Sport and Exercise topic of their choice which was handed in during teaching week one, marked and handed back to students. The module timetable was then delivered as shown below:

Week	Lecture	Workshop
1	Introduction to the module	Reflecting on the essay process
2	Learning and Teaching in Higher Education	Learning Styles
3	Developing Research Skills	Using e-resources
4	Plagiarism and Referencing	Internet based session
5	Writing Styles (1): The written word	Understanding plagiarism and referencing
6	Writing Styles (2): Report Writing, Reading and Summarising	Peer assessment: Essay introduction OSNL

7	Assessment, feedback and revision	Peer assessment: Essay main body OSNL
8	Introduction to Qualitative Research	Peer assessment: Essay conclusion and bibliography OSNL
9	Introduction to Quantitative Research	Qualitative Methodologies - choosing the right methodology
10	Qualitative Research (2)	Quantitative Methodologies – becoming acquainted with statistical concepts
11	Quantitative Research (2)	Working with Qualitative / Quantitative data
12	Module summary	Working with Qualitative / Quantitative data

In week 6 students resubmitted their re-worked essay of 2000 words to Blackboard Discussion Board for peer assessment.

These online discussions took place over three weeks, were carried out in seminar groups and focused on the introduction, main body and conclusion with references of their essays respectively. The Assignment Survival Kit www.staffs.ac.uk/ask was used as the main resource to assist students in their deliberations. Each week the seminar tutor provided feedback in the form of a summary to student discussions. Students were expected to use these discussions to help them make appropriate changes to their final submission.

Pilot Study Transcript

C_4 Posting a bulletin, looking at your pair's bulletin, seeing if you agreed with what they've said and then posting a reply to that, things you agreed with things you didn't. Allowed me to see what other people thought of the web site, the way they had evaluated it, not just myself. Then you got, obviously, to post a reply to them saying well look at this look at that and also got their feedback to yours. [Question: What ways did you feel it was useful?] You got to see what you was missing out or something you hadn't looked at, so they could bring up the points saying may be look at this, look at this. [Question: What did you comment on?] Made the point that I agreed with most of what he said but I did a point that maybe he should have looked at the end of the URL that was all really, but he did really good comments.

You got to see what other people thought about obviously your evaluation, get new points in case you missed anything. You obviously want to help your fellow colleagues, points they had missed or give them a bit of support and backup.

J_4 Somebody commenting on your evaluation and you could possibly highlight things that you overlooked obviously you always think your own work is perfect, sometimes it's a bit of an eye opener when somebody says you should have done this, gets you thinking about everything.

N_3 Ok, bit of a debate but it was ok you know. Everybody's got limits ain't they and you've got to respect the other person's opinion and they have to respect your opinion at the end of the day. I found it useful because you see other people's

opinions and views on things, if you was just to stick to one opinion and view you wouldn't get nothing out of it. Where you can look at both points of view and say oh yeah, they've got a point there or they could look at mine, well it's better to work like that because everybody's got different views on the same subject but everybody got a different view on it so it is a good thing really.

K_3 Made our replies on the Forum, we had to feedback on each others. I remember I was commenting on his, he was commenting on mine and I was writing about how he hadn't actually writ about all the actual points you were meant to evaluate in his evaluation and also the fact that he hadn't really researched football hooliganism on the FA website and done the search for it which I had done and we was having a bit of a debate between each other about whether it was a good website or not.

Staff Training Materials

Instructions given to staff

Activity

For this workshop students will need to put their document into Blackboard, consult the ASK resource for guidance on writing a good introduction, comment on a partner's efforts and then enter a short debate on what makes a good essay introduction.

The instructions to students (in handout form) are very detailed at this stage to give them plenty of guidance on how to complete the activity.

Your task is to tease out the best points from these postings on Discussion Board and summarise them in a **Tutor Summary** for the following week. You may wish to join in the debate as it progresses.

Once all contributions have been made, at some point before the next workshop you will need to construct and post a tutor summary. Guidance on how to do this (and an example of the first **student activity**) are shown below.

Instructions for students

SHP 91000-1 Research and Professional Development RPD–Workshop Week 6 Semester 1.

Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

The aims of this workshop are to:

1. **Understand the criteria for writing an essay introduction**
2. **Evaluate your peer's essay introduction**
3. **Reflect on how you can use this peer evaluation to improve your own submission in future**

Over the last few weeks on this module we have covered electronic resources, the research process and writing styles. By the time you submit your 1200 word summative essay on Xth December 200X by 4pm you will have been provided with all the necessary guidance to complete an effective piece of academic work.

We are going to do this piece of work via Blackboard Discussion Board. At first you will need to follow ALL the instructions given below to complete the workshop effectively.

Task 1 – First of all you will need to add your introduction as an Attachment by following these instructions:

1. Log onto **Blackboard**
2. Go to **Effective Learning**
3. Select **Groups**
4. Select relevant tutor group
5. Select **Group Discussion Board**
6. Select **Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction**
7. Select **Post your attachment here**
8. Select **Reply**
9. Type in '**My essay introduction**' in **Message** box
10. Scroll down to **Attachment:** box
11. Select **Browse**
12. Select the file which contains your essay introduction
13. Select **Open**
14. Select **Submit**
15. Check your posting has been added
16. Minimise Blackboard

Task 2 – Secondly you will need to find out what makes a good essay introduction by doing this:

1. Open a new tab in **Internet Explorer**
2. Go to www.staffs.ac.uk/ask

3. Type in your essay deadline – put 5/12/08
4. Select **Calculate your Assignment Schedule**
5. Scroll down to **Step 9 ‘How do I write my essay up?’**
6. Select **‘structuring your essay’**
7. Make some hand-written notes of what should be contained in an academic essay introduction

Task 3 – Thirdly, you will need to read your partners introduction and write down some comments like this:

1. Maximise **Blackboard**
2. Find your partner’s essay introduction
3. Open the **Attachment**
4. Read your **partner’s** introduction carefully
5. Make some hand-written notes on what they have written, for example, **‘good first sentence but no argument’**

Task 4 – Finally you need to join the debate on the discussion board like this:

- 1) Select **Reply**
- 2) Type in your comments based on your notes, for example you could say something like this, **‘your first sentence grabbed my attention because it stated very clearly the topic you were going to cover but you didn’t state your arguments.’**
- 3) Make, in total, at least 5 **sensible** contributions between yourself and your partner (simple comments are not acceptable)
- 4) Once you have completed this, read other introduction’s and contribute to the debate
- 5) Read the postings from other members of your group
- 6) Do you agree?
- 7) Yes?
- 8) Give your reasons why
- 9) Do you agree?
- 10) No? give your reasons why

Things to remember

1. Be respectful at all times (we covered behaving professionally last week!)
2. This is an academic discourse resource so please respect its use
3. Don’t take things personally – comments are only meant to be helpful from both staff and your peers
4. Staff will moderate and summarise the comments once the session has been completed

Tutor Summary

To save time try the following:

Copying all student postings to Word

Go to the Peer Assessment Activity for your group

Make sure all student contributions are showing

Select the small red triangle on the line above the first posting

Choose **Select All** (icon with 2 red ticks)

Choose **Collect**

Right click the mouse

Choose **Select All** from the Menu

Open **Word**

Paste into **Word**

You can then copy and paste selected student comments from **Word** into the Tutor Summary in **Blackboard**

Creating a Tutor Summary

In the **Peer Assessment Activity** (with all **YOUR** group postings showing) do the following:

Select Reply to **Geoff Walton's** posting

Type in **Tutor Summary for Peer Assessment** in the **Subject:** box

Copy and paste relevant student comments into the **Message** area.

Personalise these and add your own comments as appropriate. This is an example of one approach used last year:

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Hi all,

Thank you for your contributions in respect of the introduction. Lots of good quality & valid comments have been made & a selection is detailed below. The key feature with these comments (& indeed some others that have not been used as examples) is that you have justified your points with an explanation as to why it was good or in need of improvement. This is the essence of critical writing so well done & keep it up!

Examples:

From Ringo:

Good choice of quote in opening paragraph, which gives an opening insight to the essay and can be encouraging to readers. Gives a general outline of what is included within and

examples. Only one drawback is the odd use incorrect grammar but on the whole, content wise is good.

From John:

Starts off the essay well by introducing what the topic is about and goes straight into what the differences between women's and men's football is. He could then reference the source where he got the information from and go into more detail about the topic.

From George:

good start to the essay. speaking about first gender divisions from young ages. then the introduction talks about TV and the media. A good reference would be to use a table showing the difference of male and female attention in sports media. such as how male sports are widely used more in media.

From Paul:

George, this is a very solid and good introduction, it states the basis on which your essay is on it clearly identifies the male dominance that is in modern sports and sets a tone for the rest of the essay. however I feel that for an introduction it may be a little long winded. Maybe some of the arguments would be better suited in the main body of the assignment.

From Frankie:

A good start to the introduction with a relevant quote that tied together the essay with a general view on gender division. Towards the end of the introduction I feel it became a little brief but in doing so it did show everything the essay was going to include.

From Benny:

Very good opening statement in the introduction. Goes on to make some really good points but needs to be backed up with some evidence.. ie, references.

From Bjorn:

Although the introduction states the intentions of the essay very clearly and gives a broad range of intended information for the main body, he uses his own opinion right from the outset.

From Jimi:

A clear and to the point introduction, Bjorn. Good use of words to grip the readers attention but maybe try to refrain from mentioning the title within the Introduction. :)

Best wishes, Chris

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Discussion Board postings 2008 (approximately half of discourse from one 50min session shown here)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 10
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:13
Author: <wv003538@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: What makes a good athlete

[Remove](#)

Good Start to the essay you clearly state what the whole essay will revolve around. However you could go into more detail about what you are going to discuss i.e the certain areas such as nutrition, coaching, etc.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 10
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:18
Author: <sv001204@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: What makes a good athlete

[Remove](#)

Good start just watch for the use of 'I will be exploring ideas to discuss'.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 12
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:18
Author: <mv003691@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good start to the essay, could of expanded on some of the main points of what will be included in the main part. Could of maybe included a refrence or to explain some of the points you are on about in the introduction.

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 9
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:21
Author: <sv001204@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: What makes a good athlete

Maybe try to develop your introduction to state what areas you are going to look at. For example coaching is mentioned later on in your essay.

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 6
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:22
Author: <wv003538@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good Start to the essay you clearly say what will be discussed in the essay as well as other things that could be if the essay was to be expanded. A few examples could be used to help explain some of the points such as mentality.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 9
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:23
Author: <sv001204@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Maybe try to develop your introduction to state what areas you are going to look at. For example coaching is mentioned later on in your essay.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 8
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:24
Author: <sv001208@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

good introduction, good quotation used. Just thought the main points of the essay could be outlined more clearly.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 11
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:27
Author: <wv003538@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

This introduction is good and to the point, from reading the introduction you clearly know what the essay will be talking about and also lets us know that there will be theories involved later on.

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 8
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:27
Author: <sv001204@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Clear and concise but watch out for 'In this essay I will be addressing' it should be 'this essay will'

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 13
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:27
Author: <sv001208@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Clearly states what the essay will discuss. A bit brief, and could explain the points a little more. Other than that a good 'to the point' introduction.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 6
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:30
Author: <tv001207@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

You state what you are going to do well here, it could be expanded a bit more. Talk about the other points that you will put in your essay.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 7
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:30
Author: <tv005850@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

A good, detailed introduction clearly outlining what you are planning to include in your essay.

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction Times Read: 14
Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:30
Author: <mv003691@student.staffs.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good introduction maybe could of expanded on some of the points like the psychological theories instead of just listing them, or described them with a reference.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 5

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:31

Author: <wv004953@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Makes good points about what is going to be discussed in the essay main body, however some areas should be left to talk about in the main body and not needed in the introduction. Makes a good point to start but doesn't make an argument and outline the question.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 8

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:31

Author: <st287054@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good start, you could make it a little bit longer, and explain yourself a little better

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 4

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:32

Author: <sv001208@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Agree with John and Chrissie about the main points of the essay being expanded more. Overall good introduction, a little brief but states what you are going to argue.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 5

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:33

Author: <tv001207@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good start, could maybe when you say what the essay will be focusing on, go into more detail and state the points that you will be using. You haven't quite said what the essay is

going to do yet.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 5

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:33

Author: <sv001204@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: Post your attachment here

[Remove](#)

Good start to the essay does it job. Leads into the next paragraph well.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 3

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:36

Author: <wv003538@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: My essay introduction

[Remove](#)

Really good introduction, clearly states what the essay will be talking about. However avoid using "this essay will" to start bothe new sentences.

[Reply](#)

Forum: Peer Assessment: The Essay Introduction

Times Read: 6

Date: Thu Oct 30 2008 11:38

Author: <sv001208@student.staffs.ac.uk>

Subject: Re: What makes a good athlete

[Remove](#)

Good start to the essay, quotation used to explain the essay. Just think you could include the main points of what you are going to be discussing, and explain them a little.

Could OSNL be assessed|?

Possible OSNL Assessment guidelines

To gain 10% for this part of the assignment.

Make at least one relevant contribution to each of the three discussion forum conversations.

To gain 20% for this part of the assignment.

As for 10% PLUS make at least one constructive criticism of a fellow students assignment.

To gain 30% for this part of the assignment.

As for 20% PLUS make at least one suggestion for improvement.

To gain 40% for this part assignment.

As for 30% PLUS at least one suggested good quality reference in addition to those already mentioned by your fellow students.

References

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