Reflections of Students in Their Use of Asynchronous Online Seminars

Mark Groves1 and John O'Donoghue2*

1University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom // Tel: +44 1902323263 // M.Groves@wlv.ac.uk
2University of Central Lancashire, Preston, United Kingdom // Tel: +44 1772894599 // j.odonoghue@uclan.ac.uk

*contact author

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research that has been carried out into the use, process, and effectiveness of an asynchronous online seminar within an undergraduate sports studies degree programme. Contemporary sources are used to justify the use of technology supported learning (TSL) in higher education and to inform a reflective and critical account of the planning and delivery of an asynchronous online seminar. Through student feedback gained from qualitative questionnaires, we conclude that the online seminar made a positive contribution to the learning experience of the majority of participating students. However, encouraging widespread participation was problematical. It was also clear that some participants only took part because of the extrinsic rewards on offer and that this might have had some impact on the quality of their learning experience (Biggs, 2003). Despite the benefits of the online seminar, we would also suggest that where student numbers are manageable, the benefits of a “blended” approach, delivering online seminars in conjunction with more traditional face-to-face seminars, should be considered.

Keywords

Forum, Engagement, Technology, Learning, Teaching, Collaboration

Introduction

Increasing student numbers in higher education make it much more difficult for university teachers to incorporate traditional face-to-face seminars within their teaching (Maier & Warren, 2000). Indeed, the difficulties in using strategies which depend on close contact with students have resulted in the asynchronous online seminar becoming more popular amongst university teachers (Biggs, 2003). This article focuses on the asynchronous online seminar and examines the extent to which such an activity can enhance the student learning experience.

Technology has the potential to enhance the learning of students if used appropriately. It can encourage more independent and active learning as well as be an efficient means of delivering course materials (McKimm, Jollie, & Cantillon, 2003). However the emphasis must be on sound pedagogical design rather than on the technology itself (Downing, 2001). This can be supported by an informed institutional policy and developmental infrastructure which enable staff and inform what is considered effective use of technology in learning and teaching (Moron-Garcia, 2006).

A key reason for the use of technology within a learning situation is to enhance the quality of learning and teaching. It should follow that this use demonstrates the characteristics of good learning and teaching practice. Research over the past 20 years has given some indications as to the characteristics of a quality learning and teaching experience. For example, Marton and Säljö (1997), Ramsden (1992), Biggs (2003), and Prosser and Trigwell (1999) have identified qualitatively different student approaches to learning that can be used to characterise the differing ways in which students engage with learning tasks and their learning environment. Research has shown that students’ learning outcomes are correlated with these different approaches to their learning, and that a major influence upon how they perceive the nature of their learning is through the methodologies and tasks used by teaching staff (Kember, 1997). Social constructivist perspectives on the furtherance of learning (Wenger, 1998) advocate that encouraging collaboration and interaction with peers, and thus exposure to alternative perspectives through an opportunity to negotiate meanings, might be a beneficial method of fostering deep learning. The necessary processes of reflection, self-evaluation, and initiation of new learning (Kolb, 1984) are also likely to be triggered and emulated in such collaborative learning situations. Group work as a methodology in face-to-face situations may well promote a deep approach to learning. It has a well-established rationale (Biggs, 2003) and is the cornerstone of pedagogic approaches such as discussion forums.

A number of writers have outlined the numerous advantages of using the asynchronous online seminar within higher education teaching and have suggested ways in which this type of technology supported learning (TSL) might help to...
improve the student learning experience. For example, Maier and Warren (2000) have argued that the online seminar can actually provide a better quality of discussion, when compared to a traditional face-to-face seminar. Williams (2002) concurred, suggesting that an asynchronous seminar enables students to consider and construct more thoughtful comments before sharing them with the class. Littlejohn and Stefani (1999) have suggested that the permanence of electronic contributions can also be considered beneficial because they can provide students with a resource which can be used for revision or to enhance future learning. The suggestion that an online discussion equalizes the opportunity to contribute is also of note (Maier and Warren, 2000). Many students like to think before they speak or may speak English as a second language, while others may be quiet, shy, and easily “talked over” (Williams, 2002, p. 266). In a face-to-face seminar, these individuals may be disadvantaged but would be more able to contribute in an online debate (Maier & Warren, 2000). Similarly, during an online discussion, contributions are less likely to be judged as a result of race, gender, or disability (Maier & Warren, 2000), and so the learning experience of a wider range of students can be enhanced.

In providing a critical examination of the asynchronous online seminar, we also need to acknowledge potential drawbacks. For example, some students could actually be intimidated by the permanence of contributions when compared to easily forgotten face-to-face comments (Williams, 2002), while students without frequent access to a computer will be disadvantaged (Inglis, Ling, & Joosten, 1999). Online discussion also takes place without the rich mixture of speech and body language that can help to convey meaning and emotion, and so students do not get the opportunity to practise the art of verbal communication. Finally, it is notoriously difficult to encourage participation in an optional online activity (Kear, 2004; Mason, 1999), and so Salmon (2003) stressed the importance of actually motivating students to take part.

This paper is a consideration of the effectiveness of a particular TSL solution within a specific module that is delivered as part of the undergraduate sports studies degree programme at a post-1992 British university. The evaluation is based on the feedback of students who participated in the online seminar and aimed to discover the extent to which this type of TSL can enhance the student learning experience and emphasise any improvements that should be made in any future delivery.

**Design of the investigation**

**Context**

The context of this piece of research was set in a second-year undergraduate sports sociology module. During week one of this module, a traditional face-to-face seminar activity was undertaken within the classroom session in order to help the students to arrive at a suitable issue that could form the basis of a presentation that was a requirement of the module. As a result of the discussion which occurred within this seminar, each student was able to produce an outline of a presentation that they could conceivably deliver later in the module. This outline included the issue that they would present on (e.g., the sport of boxing), the potential title (e.g., should boxing be banned?), the different arguments that could be presented within the presentation, and the way in which they could apply various social theories to their particular issue.

In previous years, the students presented this outline at a tutorial in week two, when the module staff would provide feedback on their proposal. On this occasion, the students were given a further opportunity to develop their presentation via the use of an asynchronous online seminar. Tutorials were then arranged in week three so that module staff could consider the students’ presentation proposals. Within the asynchronous online seminar students were expected to upload their presentation proposals into a forum on the university’s online learning framework before giving feedback to three of their peers. This feedback needed to emphasise the strengths of each of the presentation proposals they considered but also needed to highlight at least two areas where they felt the presentation proposals could be improved.

**Delivery of the asynchronous online seminar**

The online seminar was structured in a way that would enhance the student learning experience and give the students a better chance of producing a quality presentation assessment. Indeed, we have taken some time in this section of the article to show how the delivery of this TSL reflected the thinking of a number of learning theories. First, we
were conscious that students learn in a variety of different ways and we were keen for the online seminar to reflect these differences. For example, by providing feedback on the work of their peers, the students were, in essence, taking on the role of the teacher. This was considered a strength of the TSL, as Glasser (cited by Biggs, 2003) as well as McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, and Smith (1987) have emphasised that student learning will be enhanced when students teach other students. The TSL was also mapped against Bloom’s taxonomy (1956). Maier and Warren (2000) explained that this taxonomy could be divided into three overlapping domains, namely, the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Most learning outcomes within higher education come from the cognitive domain, which is separated further into knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

The TSL was structured in a way that would encourage the students to move beyond the initial stages of this cognitive domain and, by asking them to consider the work of their peers and provide some kind of feedback, we hoped that some of them might actually be able to analyse or even evaluate the proposals presented by their fellow learners. This was facilitated by the tutor, who posted within the forum that feedback was required. The students hoped that some of them might actually be able to analyse or even evaluate the proposals presented by their fellow learners. This was facilitated by the tutor, who posted within the forum that feedback was required. The students found the prompt and the opportunity to provide feedback a satisfying and rewarding experience.

There were, however, other factors which needed to be considered. For example, it was clear that if the student learning experience was to be enhanced in this way, students needed to actually take part. Consequently, steps were taken to motivate the students to participate (Salmon, 2003). There were a number of ways in which the delivery of the online seminar was shaped by the need to do this. First, students were informed that if they fully participated in the online seminar they would have some input to the scheduling of their presentations later in the module, enabling them to avoid weeks when they had to submit assessment in other modules, that is, scheduling or phasing work during the course rather than submitting it at the end of the module. Second, the level at which the task was set was related to research by Marton and Saljo (cited by Biggs 2003, p. 11), which split student methods of learning into two. The surface approach is where a learner skims through, allowing facts to be absorbed but not the overall point the author is making. So here we are exposing students to new knowledge for assimilation, not necessarily for understanding. In the deep approach, the learner delves below the surface to understand the meaning. Biggs’s definition of good teaching (2003, p. 13) is one in which the deep approach is encouraged, and to maximise the chances of this happening, he suggested a theory of constructive alignment (2003, p.32), where levels of understanding are defined which become the activities that students perform. Whilst we were hoping that a deeper approach to learning would be facilitated, we were clear that the process had to be constructively aligned.

Salmon (2003) explained that e-moderators cannot be complacent about students’ online skills and should provide activity that allows all students to participate. Many students are likely to be driven by achievement motivation and are more likely to participate in tasks that they know they can complete (McClelland, 1985). By providing an activity that was based around a discussion forum, the task was kept at a simplistic level, making widespread participation more likely. Nevertheless, the need to avoid complacency about a student’s online skills (Salmon, 2003) meant that some training was given during the contact session in which the task was issued.

A further area to consider is whether or not the students actually feel that the activity is of value (Salmon, 2003). Expectancy-value theory (Feather, 1982; Biggs, 2003) suggests that learning activity must have some perceived value to the learner in order to encourage participation. It was consideration of this theory that encouraged us to link the TSL to the presentation assessment that the students would eventually complete in this module. Indeed, a number of authors (Maier & Warren, 2000; Salmon, 2003) have argued that because all but the most experienced e-learners are likely to be extrinsically motivated, participation in online learning will often increase if that activity is linked to assessment.

It should also be noted that any interaction within the seminar was between the students, with tutor input kept to a minimum. Kear (2004) found that students using these types of seminars attached a greater level of importance to the input of fellow students than they did to the contributions of staff, while others have also suggested that students place great value on the advice and support that they get from their peers (Maier & Warren, 2000; Singletary & Anderson, 1995). It was hoped that the students would be more likely to participate in the online seminar if this type of student interaction was encouraged. (O’Donoghue & Singh, 2001).

Additional factors included access. For example, delivering the seminar through the university’s online learning framework meant that all students could access the seminar via their own university online account either at home or on a university machine, which addresses the issue of universal access (Inglis et al., 1999) and the need for an activity that equalizes opportunity to contribute (Maier and Warren, 2000). Finally, online seminars will not provide
any opportunity to practice the art of verbal communication, and so Maier and Warren (2000) suggested that it is a good idea to retain some face-to-face seminars. This is why this TSL was actually used to supplement the more traditional classroom-based face-to-face seminar that was delivered in week one of the module.

Evaluating the asynchronous online seminar

Student feedback provides one of the most satisfactory methods of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods (Biggs, 2003). Kear (2004) used a student feedback survey to evaluate an online course at the Open University, while MacDonald and Thompson (2005) used similar techniques as part of their evaluation of an online programme of study, and we have also used student feedback to evaluate the effectiveness of this asynchronous online seminar. In the contact session that followed the student’s participation in this TSL, 29 participants completed questionnaires that aimed to gauge the effectiveness of the asynchronous online seminar in helping them to produce a proposal for the presentation element of the module in question. Of these, some 75 percent also participated in the peer evaluation process. The questionnaire used a qualitative approach that is often encouraged when gaining student feedback because it is more able to elicit student reactions than single-response quantitative-style questions (Stringer & Finlay, 1993). All questionnaires were completed anonymously within the contact session. The responses were analysed by the course team in conjunction with various learning theories in order to gauge the value and effectiveness of the online seminar in enhancing the student learning experience. The evaluation focused on understanding the content of the seminars, application of learnt knowledge, and transference into other domains of understanding. In summary, did the activity promote a deeper sense of learning?

Discussion of results

This analysis has helped to identify the effectiveness of the chosen TSL and has helped us to provide recommended future actions in the delivery of similar online activity. Initial feedback suggests that the majority of students received this online seminar in a positive manner \((n = 27)\), and it was clear that a number of students attached some value to the task because of the assistance that they gained with regard to their presentation assessment:

- [I received] different peoples ideas and different ideas to incorporate into my assignment (Student 29).
- [I got] inspiration from other presentation topics (Student 10).
- It did help as it gave me a small idea of how the presentation will be received and how it could be improved (Student 14).

A number of authors (Maier & Warren, 2000; Salmon, 2003) have argued that student motivation will often increase if the activity is linked to assessment, and this feedback would certainly substantiate these claims. Furthermore, this data would also concur with the expectancy-value theory (Feather, 1982; Biggs, 2003), which suggests that an activity must have some value to the students in order to encourage motivation and subsequent participation. Nevertheless, some caution should be exercised at this point, as it was clear that certain students \((n = 5)\) were still not motivated to participate despite the fact that the online seminar was linked to assessment:

- I did not have the time; I had other work to do (Student 16).
- We had already decided on a presentation topic in class (Student 28).
- I partly forgot, but also I don’t have any free time on Monday–Wednesday so I didn’t get the task done while it was still fresh in my mind (Student 7).

Moreover, the fact that not all students who participated had implications with regard to the student learning experience because not all participants actually received feedback for their presentation proposal:

- Personally the classroom seminar was more useful as we did not receive any feedback [online] (Student 4).
- No feedback was received online (Student 23).
- I cannot say [how useful it would have been] as I haven’t received any feedback. It would have been useful though (Student 6).

It could be argued that to encourage full participation, an online task should not just be linked to assessment (Maier & Warren, 2000; Salmon, 2003) but should be assessed, and the fact that a number of students failed to participate in this activity might provide some support for this argument. However, there are those who might feel somewhat uncomfortable with this particular recommendation, and a brief consideration of motivation theory might help us to
understand why this is the case. Motivation theory suggests that it is the intrinsically motivated individuals who will put more into, and get more out of, any task that they perform. Intrinsically motivated students gain intellectual pleasure from problem solving and have an inherent spark that causes them to question, wonder, and hypothesise. It is this approach that drives deep learning and the best academic work (Biggs, 2003).

Extrinsically motivated individuals do not focus on the process of learning, or even the product, but on the consequence of the product, such as obtaining the reward that a pass mark would bring if, as suggested above, an online task were assessed (Biggs, 2003). Biggs argued that extrinsically motivated learners tend to adopt a surface approach to learning and so we could certainly question the value of motivating students to participate in an online task by offering an extrinsic reward. Taking these ideas into account, we were concerned, although not surprised (Salmon, 2003), that several students who participated in this online seminar seemed to be extrinsically motivated. As detailed earlier, students fully participating in this particular online task were given some input into the scheduling of their presentation. Certain participants suggested that this was the only reason that they participated in the seminar and gave little indication that the seminar had helped their learning:

- We get to chose when or at least have an input into our presentation time (Student 9).
- [We] can choose when our presentation will be (Student 4).

Although these attempts to encourage student participation were done so that students would benefit from the online learning experience, we started to ask ourselves how beneficial this had actually been. We can clearly identify concerns about the extrinsic motivation of the students who only completed the task because of the extrinsic benefits on offer and ask ourselves about the quality of their learning experience (Biggs, 2003). Indeed, we might recommend that, in order to improve the student learning experience, we develop future online activities that have an intrinsic interest to the students (Print, 1993). However, it might be unfair to suggest that when considering intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in this way, we should consider online learning any different from other types of learning.

One of the perceived strengths of this online seminar was that it enabled students to give and receive feedback for their presentation proposals. There were two reasons why the seminar was delivered in this way. Firstly, students place a great deal of value on the views and opinions of their peers (Singletary & Anderson, 1995; Kear, 2004; Maier & Warren, 2000) and this idea gained support in the student feedback with a number of participants ($n = 24$) suggesting that the main benefit of the online seminar was the feedback that they received from their classmates:

- The online seminar was of most value as the feedback that you could receive was most helpful. (Student 11).
- The feedback from other/fellow students. (Student 14).
- Seeing people’s views on our work and looking at other people’s ideas. (Student 27).
- Getting feedback from others and receiving new ideas (Student 2).

The second reason for structuring the TSL in this way was that it enabled the students to actually give feedback, meaning that they were, in essence, taking the role of the teacher. This should have been an especially useful aspect of the seminar because learning tends to be enhanced if students teach other students (Glasser, 1988, cited by Biggs, 2003; McKeachie et al., 1987). Additionally, we hoped that students might learn to analyse and evaluate their peers’ work and reach the higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (Maier & Warren, 2000). However, the students were less aware of the benefits of actually providing feedback, with only one student commenting on this:

- I don’t know because nobody replied, but the feedback that I gave made me think about different issues (Student 1).

Finally, it has been useful to consider student perceptions of the online seminar in comparison to the classroom seminar. The responses in this area were varied, with certain students attaching more value to the online seminar:

- The online seminar was of most value as the feedback you could receive was helpful (Student 11).
- The online seminar was the most helpful (Student 24).
- [The online seminar] was most useful because of the feedback that we got from the other students (Student 8).

Conversely, other students seemed to gain more from the classroom seminar:

- I feel that talking to people in class is more beneficial than online (Student 3).
- The classroom discussions I feel were very helpful and very encouraging (Student 26).
- The classroom seminar was of the most help to me (Student 5).
This feedback perhaps endorses the decision to run this online seminar in conjunction with a more traditional face-to-face seminar. Indeed, we should not dismiss the usefulness of the classroom seminar too easily (Maier & Warren, 2000), and this particular student feedback would help to support any recommendation that future online seminars should, where student numbers allow, supplement a classroom-based discussion. However, with regard to this particular online seminar, we might consider that it was implemented in a module of 30 students and that one of the major benefits of an online seminar is that it enables teachers to manage larger numbers of students more effectively (Maier & Warren, 2000). Indeed, Biggs (2003) discussed the management of large classes and the problems associated with using strategies that depend on close contact with a large number of students. Therefore, while we would recommend that online and classroom seminars supplement each other in the case of smaller classes, we may have to exercise some caution if using this approach when teaching larger groups of students.

Conclusions

The use of an asynchronous online seminar seemed to enhance the learning experience of the students. Further work needs to be undertaken to qualify and quantify this, as we would hope that the use of TSL has engendered a measurable and deeper approach to learning. Several students valued the feedback they received \((n = 22)\) and suggested that it helped them to provide a clearer presentation proposal. However, there are certain issues that need to be considered when delivering similar activities in the future. For example, considering the potential benefits in this area, it was a concern that the students did not acknowledge the usefulness of actually giving feedback to their peers. This would need to be emphasised in more detail in the future.

There was also an issue with participation, and a tenuous recommendation suggested that contributions could be formally assessed in order to encourage a greater level of engagement with the TSL. However, caution must be expressed in this area because students motivated by such extrinsic rewards tend to adopt a surface approach to learning, and so the benefits of motivating students in this way would appear to be questionable. Indeed, it was a concern that a number of students who completed this particular TSL did so only because of the extrinsic rewards available, and so we suggest that teachers channel their energies into providing an online activity that has an intrinsic value to students and move away from encouraging participation through extrinsic rewards.

Finally, student feedback that praised the contribution of the classroom seminar suggested that it might be unwise to consider replacing the traditional face-to-face seminar with online discussion. Consequently, it is recommended that, where student numbers allow, future online seminars be used to supplement more traditional face-to-face activity. However, in making such a recommendation we need to acknowledge that this particular TSL was delivered to a class of 30 students and that a benefit of the online seminar is that teachers can manage large classes more easily. Indeed, the difficulties in running classroom seminars with large groups of students would need to be taken into account when considering this recommendation. Allowing students to feel involved and to take responsibility for their own learning (Davies & Smith, 2006) will foster a deeper understanding of concepts and knowledge, and their application. The technology does not have to be complex or leading edge. It does, however, need to be constructively aligned with the curriculum objectives and learning outcomes so that the students can become actively engaged in their learning and the learning and teaching process, rather than be passive recipients of knowledge and information.

References


