Title - Blackboard Discussion Boards - Adding Value to Work-Based Learning

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Support

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Activity - Using Blackboard discussion boards during Level 2 WBL module to offer
distance support.

Group - Level 2 Sport Development with Physical Education (PE) students.

Aim - To trial online support to the Level 2 cohort whilst on work-based learning.

Context / **Background -** In 2001, the DfES asked Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to build 'bridges between the campus and employers'. Delivering a module such as this one creates this bridge. Students often secure paid employment following placement and graduates have secured full-time employment as a consequence of their work-based learning. Also, there exists a need to liaise and collaborate effectively with placement providers so that they are aware of student needs during this period.

Boud & Symes (2000) gave an 'acknowledgement that work… is imbued with learning opportunities'. The opportunity to apply theory to practice is an important aspect of the Sport Development with PE programme. Many learning opportunities are available for the students to benefit from. Online support allows the students to discuss these experiences with their tutor, peers and offer support to each other.

Part of the assessment of this module requires students to carry out a key skills assessment, pre- and post-placement, and an action plan for future personal development. A lot of the planning will be for career choices and will include reflection of their experience on placement. Online support can be used to support this part of the process for students.

The nature of this module means that students are away from campus for a long period of time. Online support gives students the opportunity to speak to their tutor whilst developing important skills like communication, using information technology, negotiation and time management.

Example - Students undertake work-based learning at all levels of their undergraduate programme. At Level 2 students carry out their placement in a

4 week block at the start of the second semester. Students are in placements in various locations across Great Britain & Northern Ireland and therefore some do not see staff from breaking up at Christmas until their return towards the end of February.

It was with this in mind that a trial was designed to offer online student support during this period of time. Thirteen students (1 Tutor Group) were used. Over the 4 week period an Online Tutorial would take place every Wednesday at 1pm and then a questionnaire would be administered on return to the university. This opportunity was purely voluntary and the students were under no obligation to take part.

- 12 out of 13 students (92%), completed the questionnaire
- Out of the 12, 10 (83%) had made use of the opportunity
- Out of those 10, 8 (61%) had found it useful
- 83% of the students stated that they would make use of online tutorials in future.

Students had to create a portfolio for their assessment. Some students provided evidence of their online tutorials to support their work.

A report and respond method was used to ask students to comment on observations made during the trial, feedback indicated that the sessions were;

- a good way to "catch up wth every one";
- allows the clarifcation of tasks;
- allows students to ask tutor questions;
- enables students to share their experiences.

Other comments - Although a little slow at times, students appeared to enjoy and benefit from the use of discussion boards to provide 'live' support during their work-based learning. One student commented "It was much better than just having emails."

It was felt that being able to offer online support was in keeping with the ethos of the Centre in relation to student support. Students were able to clarify tasks in relation to assessment but were also able to seek information to help with their placement.

The positive response from the pilot group was encouraging - the fact that 83% of the group tried the discussion board was seen as a good result. Some key skill development took place which may not have happened with non participants in the pilot study.

However, some responses required further consideration:

- In the 3rd week an attempt was made to use the Online Chat facility on Blackboard with no success. One student stated that it "…would have taken 1 hour 32 minutes to install software…", another commented that they were "…puzzled…just grasped the online discussion method".

- When asked if 'something was missing' responses included "I'm not sure everyone knew how to use the threads." and that it would have been useful to have had "everyone's questions and answers up on the screen at the same time."

What next: - The use of MSN Messenger was offered as a possible solution to a number of problems that the pilot study had come across, one of the study group has expressed an interest in following this up. After presenting the findings of this pilot at Liverpool John Moores University's Teaching & Learning Conference in April 2005, further work is being carried out to allow for another Online Tutorial session to be offered to a larger group of Level 2 students in the next academic year. This should alleviate some of the negative points from the study.

A comparative study looking at MSN Messenger vs. Blackboard is in the pipeline, a collaboration between the Centre of Sport & Dance and another Faculty within the University.

References - Boud, D. and Symes, C. (2000) *Learning for real: work-based education in universities*, in: C. Symes & J. McIntyre (Eds) *Working Knowledge: the new vocationalism and higher education?* (Buckingham, SRHE and Open University Press).

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