

## **FACILITATING ONLINE PEER-INTERACTION AND STUDENT-LED SUPPORT: DEVELOPING ACADEMIC E-COMMUNITIES AMONG STUDENT POPULATIONS**

Interim report from:

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### **Introduction and overview**

This project, which aims to accelerate and strengthen the development of an academic e-community among postgraduates, is currently being conducted in Warwick Medical School, Directorate of Masters Accredited Programmes (DMAP), Institute of Clinical Education (ICE). The project, underpinned by the Medical School's e-learning strategy and Warwick's Learning and Teaching Strategy, is engaged in an exploration of how WMS postgraduates (both taught Masters and research degree students) might share their learning experiences through the medium of encouraging greater student participation with online communication. The project is using Warwick blogs to provide postgraduate students with an informal method for communication with their fellow students as an additional means for social support and information sharing: a 'virtual community'.

The project, originally scheduled to run between April 2007 - May 2008, started in September / October 2007 with the appointment of the Project Officer (JK). The delay at set-up was due to late notification of successful funding. The proposed timing of the project over 13 months (i.e. 9 months full time equivalent) has therefore been adjusted to conclude in October / November 2008. The project has made good progress both with activities to date and preparation of the next stages.

### **Progress to Date**

The Project Officer (JK) has successfully established the community blog with the active support of the WMS e-learning team. One of the initial challenges was organising students' sign-in / 'log-ins' and user names to link all students to the blog. The Project Officer acts as the primary facilitator and link-person for student queries / contact etc.

In addition, she is playing an active role in consulting DMAP Course Co-ordinators in integrating a system that ensures students know about the community blog. This is usually done at the start of each module. The Project Officer also 'prompts' students about the community blog during teaching sessions. There are further reminders about the project at student induction days, study skills sessions and SSLC meetings. The design of the blog incorporates students' suggestions and ideas from results of a survey of postgraduates carried out in the autumn 2007. The blog was launched in December 2007 and has been actively facilitated by JK to encourage and promote its use.

The project evaluation, scheduled for the summer (June - July, data collection; August - October, analysis and project write up) will explore the experience of WMS students and academics in using the blog, and compare this with online discussions by student groups in other departments (e.g. Department of English and Comparative Literature).

### **Interim outcomes**

To date (April 08) over 51 contributions to the blog in the form of 'postings' have been received. The majority of these are from students with a few entries by staff. As anticipated, student entry 'postings' are now taking place with increasing frequency as the 'early adopter' group are joined by the 'early followers'.

The Project Lead and Project Officer are analysing levels of online activity using the Google Analytics tool, since the Warwick Blogs system does not actively 'track' visits to the site. This process will be anonymous and is solely for the purpose of educational evaluation. We will also analyse blog usage and content using qualitative methods such as Content Analysis (CA).

Findings to date suggest that students ask for, and receive responses from other students, about a wide range of topics. These range from broad questions about professional skills, such as communication, to specific questions about elements of study at Warwick or particular modules.

While WMS staff have provided information in response to some student queries, a number of students have expressed a particular wish to hear from fellow students. For example, a student writes

*"I'm particularly interested in [the experience of] professionals who are working in nursing .... Is there anybody out there!!?"*

A significant number of student responses are the result of the Project Officer having forwarded queries to relevant student cohorts - suggesting that this is an effective means of promoting the sharing of experience and information.

In email exchanges with project staff as well as blog contributions, part-time postgraduates, in particular, have expressed an appreciation of support provided by online contact, beyond the specific topic being addressed. Statements include

*"I really am enjoying the blog 'chat' now... it really makes me feel in student mode"*

*"great asset for anyone trying to make headway through the bewildering world of academia!!"*

Responding to student and (other) staff views, project staff have posted entries about electronic resources for statistics and careers information. Further resources will be added over time.

The **end phase** of the project is due for completion over the summer (May - July, 2008). The evaluation phase includes comparison of WMS postgraduate student on-line activity with other University departments (e.g. Department of English and Comparative Literature). Consultation with student (and staff) volunteers is also planned. Students are to be invited to discuss their views about online communication and their use of the community blog. It is hoped to establish what students find helpful i.e. what works for them / does not work well. It is planned to include face-to-face meetings (Focus Groups) and email / blogging discussion. This is being planned in consultation with the current SSLC Chair. We will further evaluate the project's 'end point' although we anticipate that the project has become sufficiently embedded in the learning cycle to become self-sustaining with a minimum of ongoing staff intervention. We will use survey instruments, such as questionnaires (hard and soft copy) and analysis of blogging use (activity and content).

### **In summary**

The **first stages** of the project have now been completed. These include:

- Design of a survey instrument to capture students' views and their suggestions for what they would find helpful in an online communication tool
- Incorporation of these preliminary findings into the design of the student community blog
- Dissemination of start-up stage at an international conference on e-learning: Online Educa Berlin 2007: E-learning in the medical context (Biggerstaff, 2007)
- Dissemination of the project at the University E-Learning Showcase (Koistinen & Biggerstaff, 2008)
- Development and set up of the community blog for students
- Linking the blog with WMS / DMAP webpages for students, available at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/study/cpd/current/handbook-pg/support/online/>
- Identification of, and preliminary meetings with, academic colleagues from other university departments (Department of English & Comparative Literature, Sociology, History) using online communication tools such as blogs / forums with students. It is envisaged that these groups (undergraduate and postgraduate) will provide the comparator groups at the final stage of the project.
- Approaching other potential collaborators to replace colleagues who have moved since the project began
- Identification of opportunities for promoting the project to students via induction events, study skills sessions, SSLC meetings, during weeks when modules are running etc.
- Design of promotional 'flyer' - this is now incorporated in DMAP module information provided to students when they attend taught modules
- Informal 'advisory group' face-to-face and e-discussion meetings.
- Monitoring of student blogging activity (entries and comments).

### **Interim conclusions**

The subjects covered in students' blog entries, and the comments made about the information received in response, indicate that students value the ability:

- To freely ask questions at a time of their choice, including when they are off-campus due to part-time study and do not have access to face-to-face contact with other students or staff
- To reach students at different stages of experience.

In turn, the responses that students have made to others' queries indicate their willingness to share information and experience outside the more familiar face-to-face contact. For a number of student queries, there has been no other evident or commonly used means of eliciting a response – emphasising the potential for online communication to expand the informal support available to students.

As with other interactive e-learning tools, the project demonstrates the importance of active facilitation – to provide students with a contact point, identify external resources (such as online statistics information, useful websites / sources of information etc.) and foster greater student participation.

**Project webpage:**

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/study/cpd/current/handbook-pg/support/online/>

**References**

Biggerstaff, D. L. (2007) Facilitating online peer-interaction and student-led support: Developing academic e-communities among student populations in a UK medical school. *Online Educa Berlin 2007, 13<sup>th</sup> international conference on technology supported learning and training, November, Hotel InterContinental Berlin. [Invited paper: E-learning in the medical context]*

Koistinen, J. & Biggerstaff, D. (2008) Developing an on-line student community. *University of Warwick E-learning Showcase.*