

# **Student engagement with learning; using student reflections to inform practice**

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## **Summary**

The project focus was student engagement with learning. We recruited students studying Bioscience-related courses from four different institutions, with a 'brief' that over the duration of semester 2 (2011) they would use social media tools to document and share their thoughts about the different types of teaching they experienced and their resulting engagement with learning. We thereby also hoped to explore the extent of their reflective practice.

This original aim was over-ambitious. Students did not readily take part in an activity which was seen as additional to their main studies. Focus groups and a questionnaire at the end of the project revealed information regarding activities which engaged them in learning, most importantly the enthusiasm of the member of staff. The interviews also revealed that there was little awareness or understanding of reflective practice.

All students were making use of social media. The data so far indicate that this supports learning both in terms of the cognitive domain, through the sharing of information, and the affective domain, through the sharing of experience.

Staff are generally less frequent users of social media than students. However, the discussions engendered by this project led to a number of creative and innovative ideas for the use of social media, and the success of these will be followed.

## **Outcomes and reflections**

The original project envisaged an exploration of two aspects of learning and teaching: a) the approaches taken by staff which result in (or not) engagement and learning; b) the extent of reflective practice in which students are engaged. The intention was to approach these two through the medium of social networking, namely that students would post on-line their thoughts, which would provide information on both a) and b).

In the event, the original aim was over-ambitious. Students did not independently take part in an activity which was seen as additional to their main studies. Although all the students involved were active in the use of social media, they did not use this medium to address and discuss either the question of engagement, or the issue of reflection. Thus the activities 'recording and sharing of experience', and reflections, and 'on-line plenary discussion with students' did not happen.

Instead, the PI ran focus groups, combined with a questionnaire, at two institutions (Birmingham, UCLAN). Both of these proved to be valuable in the information gathered, which did cover both the aspect of staff approaches, and of reflective practice. From Hull, some on-line dialogue between tutor and a student was captured, and this student was also interviewed by telephone by the PI. In the case of Myerscough, the college policy of non-use of social media largely precluded progress with the project. Interestingly though, it transpired that a Facebook group had been set up 'informally' by students.

The meeting of staff engaged in the project, together with others from UCLAN with an interest in social media, was very productive, and although reports on the progress of the

project aims were limited, the get-together proved to be very productive in stimulating thoughts and ideas for the use of social media.

The main outcomes from these various activities can be summarised as follows:

- a. students engage when the member of staff is enthusiastic, employs active learning methods, and treats students with respect
- b. students (in years 1 and 2 at least) have little concept of reflective practice
- c. social media are widely used by students, and there are tangible benefits in accessing and sharing information (cognitive domain of learning), and in providing emotional support (affective domain)
- d. social media are less widely used by staff

## **Reflections**

- a) The information on what students find engaging / non-engaging is perhaps not completely surprising; nevertheless, when fed back to the relevant school / Department, it will provide additional material to help staff leading on learning and teaching to bring about changes in practice.
- b) Developing reflective practice seems not to come easily to students; the students interviewed were largely ignorant of the concept. However, it was also clear that they had had little if any direct guidance in how to engage in reflective practice. This project has not impacted in this area.
- c) An important, and unexpected outcome, of the project is that the staff involved have been stimulated to explore the potential uses of social media as a tool to support and enhance learning.

## **The future**

All four institutions have progressed their use of social media. In two institutions (Myerscough, Hull), students have been encouraged to set up their own Facebook groups, and these have been widely subscribed to. I have been allowed to join these groups as a 'friend'. At Birmingham, Facebook is being used in particular for field trips. In addition, several staff are making use of twitter to communicate information. At UCLAN, a member of staff set up a Facebook group for first year students, and is intending to continue to use this as a way of getting students from different year groups to interact.

I envisage taking this forward by focussing on the use being made of social media, and how it supports learning, by:

- a. engagement with Facebook groups set up at the four institutions as invited 'friend'; this will allow me to collect data regarding the type of comments which students make, and the information which they share; and
- b. continued interaction with the partners from the different institutions; as well as periodic email contact, to also follow them on Facebook and Twitter;

I also intend to produce a brief guide on how to encourage and support reflective practice in the Biosciences.

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