

Teachers, and their opinions, matter: Analysing staff perceptions of the effectiveness of online discussion forums

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This paper analyses a recent survey on staff perceptions of the effectiveness of discussion forums in a small private institution. The responses will inform future opportunities and strategies for professional development and student support within the College; setting of expectations and benchmarks for staff and students and increasing awareness of these as well as curriculum and learning design. The overall aim of the research is implementing practices that will be sustainable and address current challenges within the College of improving student retention, engagement and learning. Results indicate that while staff are generally inexperienced in the online environment they are comfortable with many aspects of online discussion forums. Main areas of concerns for staff are low levels of student engagement with each other and subject material. Staff are most interested in developing strategies to help with improving student engagement. Two profiles of staff from opposite ends of the spectrums of responses are developed and compared.

Keywords: effectiveness of online discussion forums, staff perceptions, student engagement

Introduction

Future challenges for institutions and academics come in many facets, on many levels. This paper discusses a specific challenge in the online environment - how can students be encouraged to engage in discussion forums. Whilst on the surface this may seem a simple challenge there are in fact many layers and aspects to this, including why do institutions want students to engage, how and when is this explained to them, what support and training is needed for teaching staff and students, how can curriculum and learning environments be designed to best support and encourage this. What benchmarks and examples exist on which future development can be modelled? What institutional cultures will need to be developed; what workload and administrative implications will arise and how can this be achieved in a way which will allow the innovations to be sustainable in the long term? This paper does not seek to answer all of these questions, rather it takes a snapshot of where staff believe they currently are and seeks to use the responses as a starting point in developing a road-map to the future.

Context

The Australian College of Applied Psychology is a small, private college offering courses across Vocational and Educational Training (VET) and Higher Education from Diploma to Masters level in the disciplines of counselling, communication, coaching, people management and psychology. The College is multi-campus and offers on-campus and Flexible Delivery (FD) subjects. FD, in this college, involves online learning, utilising the Moodle platform, supplemented by occasional on-campus workshops and/or workplace placements. Most teaching is completed by casual staff (educators) working with small groups of no more than 20 students. Staff are usually practitioners who teach on a part-time basis, with a small number of full- and part-time academic staff in the College also teaching FD classes. Educators, and students, are provided with all subject content in written format (either hard copy and/or via Moodle) which includes weekly activities, assessment tasks and associated readings and resources. Flexible Delivery classes have only be offered for a few years having evolved from a distance education model. Discussion forums are provided in three areas – Announcements, for educator communication; general discussion forum where staff and students can initiate and contribute to discussions on any aspect of the subject and learning forums which are pre-determined and associated with specific learning activities. This delivery model helps to create a consistent and transparent learning environment for all students.

The survey discussed in this paper is part of an ongoing research project evaluating the use of discussion forums in FD classes, with an aim to improve the effectiveness of this usage and hence increase student engagement and retention. This project was commenced as part of the ascilite Collaborative Community Mentoring programme in 2011 (Jones, 2011). The results of the staff survey and the larger project will inform future staff development options and teaching practice; student support; setting of expectations and benchmarks for staff and students and

increasing awareness of these as well as curriculum and learning design. The larger project involves an ongoing, detailed analysis of discussion forum usage with the aim of determining how these are being used and to then inform how practice and culture can be changed to improve student engagement and retention.

This research is important as it looks across sectors, analysing responses from staff in VET and HE and making comparisons between the sectors for one of the survey questions (space does not allow this for all questions). Although the College is a small private institution the results and discussion will be relevant to public universities and other institutions. The results will be able to inform others who are looking at implementing a change in the way educational technology is used within their institution. As a quantitative survey approach, specifically related to online discussion forums, involving staff teaching across many subjects in both VET and HE sectors in Australia this research adds a new dimension to the existing literature.

Research Questions/Rationale

The aim of the research is to analyse staff perceptions of current levels and types of student engagement; learning occurring within online discussion forums, and the effectiveness of these discussions. The research will investigate whether staff have a clear understanding of discussion forum usage and whether they perceive these are an effective component of learning online for FD students. Gaining insight into staff perceptions will enable us to determine how closely those perceptions match reality (as measured from usage logs and quantitative analysis of postings) and will help determine what (if any) measures will need to be implemented to help improve the usage of the forums.

Asking educators about their perceptions affirms that they are being heard and they are being empowered to be involved in the future of their development and the way in which discussion forums are developed (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011). The results also give a baseline so future research can determine if innovations influence change.

Literature Review

This literature review included the usual Google scholar, databases and journal indices searches using the keywords of student engagement, staff perceptions and online discussion forums, separately and in combinations. The focus of the searches was to find examples of similar studies and determine if there is consensus on best practice in engaging students in online discussion forums, with a particular emphasis on the importance of the teacher's role in encouraging this.

Fundamental to the purpose of this research is what is meant by student engagement. The definition that has been adopted through this research is that of Beer Clark & Jones: "engagement is the amalgamation of a number of distinct elements including active learning, collaborative learning, participation, communication among teachers and students and students feeling legitimated and supported." (Beer, Clark & Jones, 2010; p76). A complementary view is that there are many types of student engagement which occur during their learning including engagement with content, educators, other students and technology (Fleckhammer & Wise, 2011). This survey includes questions on all of these aspects of engagement. It is important to note that whilst these definitions and terms refer to student engagement in general terms, they do also apply to the specific area of online discussion forums.

There is an extensive body of literature on student engagement and the factors that can positively impact on this. These factors include pedagogical and technology-related aspects, student and teacher conceptions as well as curriculum and learning design (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Salmon, 2002; Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). A more detailed discussion of this literature is not included here due to time and space constraints but will certainly be undertaken as the College maps out future directions, as this will be a vital component in determining overarching principles and frameworks to be adopted. One factor though is now briefly discussed.

There is much evidence in the literature that teacher presence in online discussion forums is an important factor in student engagement (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Oliver & Shaw, 2003). This presence includes a number of roles and associated responsibilities; including leading, encouraging, summarising, responding to direct questions and providing feedback and cover content, pedagogical, technological and administrative areas. (eg Goodyear et al., 2001; Jahnke, 2010; Salmon, 2011). There are many variables that impact on the quality and quantity of teacher's posts including their pedagogical framework, whether they believe discussion forums serve a useful purpose in their context and their levels of experience and confidence in the use of forums (Anderson et al 2001) The survey draws out staff perceptions of their abilities in many of these aspects.

Previous studies of staff perceptions of the use of discussion forums, or other learning technologies, have mainly focussed on qualitative analysis using interviews and focus groups, involving small numbers of staff. (Challis, Holt & Rice, 2005). One report of a large survey of staff (and student) perceptions of use of a Learning Management System (LMS) at a large American university was found (Lonn & Teasley, 2009) This though was for on-campus teaching, supplemented by the LMS. There is agreement that there are perceived benefits from using technologies in the areas of student learning, enhanced communication (Lonn & Teasley, 2009) and student engagement (Waycott et al, 2010). Limitations of technologies were also noted in some studies, including increased workloads; technology being the driver, rather than pedagogy; inappropriate language on discussion forums; and loss of face-to-face interaction (Waycott et al., 2010).

As is reported in more detail later, many respondents to this survey mentioned the possibility of making participation in discussion forums compulsory and/or assessable. A review of literature on this matter indicates that there is no one dominant position on this. If an approach based on constructive alignment is adopted (Biggs & Tang, 2007) it may be more appropriate to ensure that learning activities and associated discussions are aligned with the learning outcomes, rather than having the discussion forums themselves assessed. Oliver (2002) offered alternative viewpoints of this debate suggesting assessment could help meet learning outcomes versus this could take responsibility for learning away from students. Oliver and Shaw (2003) also provide two very different views of the influence of assessment on participation. Markel (2001, p1) notes “making weekly participation in the discussion a requirement “institutionalizes” the discussion forum within the course” while Christie & Garrote note that the “way forward in the more active and productive use of LMS and OADs¹ is to weave continuous assessment into the use of such tools” (Christie & Garrote, 2011; p 237). This contrasts with O’Reilly and Newton (2002) who report that in the area of humanities structured, assessable discussion forums are no longer used as there is a high uptake of student interaction on the discussion forums, suggesting that as students become more confident and aware of the benefits of active engagement, assessment is no longer needed as an incentive. There will need to be considerable discussion and further research to allow the College to make decisions on this.

One of the limitations of the literature is that there does not appear to be much, if anything, written on benchmarks for participation in discussion forums with no research being found on minimum levels of contributions from staff or students. This may well be due to the fact that every institution, subject, teacher has different ideas and uses for discussion forums and hence there are no relevant benchmarks. Benchmarks can though provide guidance for staff on their reflection of their abilities as an online teacher and may be needed to ensure staff are reflecting on appropriate characteristics (Northcote, Seddon & Brown, 2011). As part of the ongoing project, decisions will need to be made as to the educational philosophies, pedagogical frameworks and curriculum and learning designs that will underpin future directions and these will then be able to inform any benchmarks that are set.

The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE) have developed a series of benchmarks including guidelines and good practice statements which are relevant to the use of technology in learning and teaching (ACODE, 2008). Of particular relevance to this research are Benchmarks 4, 5, 7 and 8 which relate to pedagogical application and staff and student support and training. The ALTC Good practice report: technology-enhanced learning and teaching prepared by Keppell, Suddaby and Hard (2011) provides ten outcomes that represent best practice in this area and all of these have relevance to this project and the future challenges in developing the use of online discussion forums within the College.

Methodology

The survey for staff was created in surveymonkey and 112 invitations to participate were sent to all staff and casual educators who were identified as teaching by FD mode at the beginning of 2012. This was distributed by email with one school sending a preceding message advising staff about the survey, confirming their support for the project and encouraging staff to respond. The survey was distributed in Week 4 of Term 1 as this was considered a relatively quiet period for staff, after the initial rush at the beginning of Term and prior to any assessment. One reminder email was sent two weeks after the original request. All responses were anonymous and ethics approval was sought and granted for this project (ACAP HREC Approval No 046110112).

The survey questions were developed within the College after discussion and consultation with senior staff around the types of questions and taking into account the main ways in which the discussion forum, and other

¹ OADs are online asynchronous discussions

technologies are currently used. The questions were generally Likert scale questions with some free response questions at the end of the survey. The full survey is available upon request, and some of the questions are included in the following section.

In addition an analysis of logs for Announcement posts was conducted in the Moodle online classrooms for all subjects taught by FD in terms 1-3 for 2011 for VET and HE courses for comparison with the perceived usage as identified by staff in their survey responses and this is discussed in a later section.

Survey results

This section looks at some of the results from the survey; not all questions are reported here due to lack of space. The consequences of these results and possible areas for future action and research are discussed in a later section. Forty eight responses were received from 112 invitations emailed. However 10 of these were only partial responses and were eliminated from the analysis as they had only answered the first question, which was agreeing to participate. This means there were 38 valid responses which represents a response rate of 34%.

Respondents are from across all schools and both sectors of the College. Where responses are compared across sectors, the responses from the five staff are who indicated they teach across both the School of Counselling (SoC) and VET are duplicated in both sectors. The results for the one respondent who did not respond to the question regarding in which school they taught, were not included in any comparison across sectors.

There were two questions relating to teaching experience and the responses to these showed that, as would be expected, educators have a range of experience. Responses indicate that most participants are relatively new to the College as well as the online environment, rather than one or the other. The largest group are those educators who have no experience teaching online, although they have been teaching at the College for 1-5 years.

There were three questions related to time spent on discussion forums, with workload expectations at the College, for both HE and VET, being that educators spend approximately three hours per week facilitating learning in the online class space over two or three days each week. The responses from these questions, shown in Table 1, indicate that most educators spend more time in the online class space than is expected of them. They also indicate that there is a large variation in the level of engagement of educators and that generally those educators who spend more time reading students' posts also spend more time making their own posts. A positive result from the question "On how many days per week (on average) do you read discussion forums and/or post to these forums, for each group?" is that 60% of respondents view or post on 4 or more days per week which would indicate that they do have a visible presence in their groups. This is also above the minimum expectations of the College.

Table 1: Time spent on discussion forums

Time reading (pw)	Time posting (per week)			
	<30 minutes	30-60 minutes	1-2 hours	>2 hours
<30 minutes	1	2	1	0
30-60 minutes	1	5	3	0
1-2 hours	0	4	2	4
>2 hours	0	0	3	9

(Note: Three respondents only answered one of these questions and hence are not included in this Table)

Educators were specifically asked about the number of Announcements they post each term. Announcements, in this College, are a discussion post utilised to present important information to students by educators. They differ from general discussion forums in that only staff can post to the forum and students cannot respond to them. Within the College these are considered an essential form of communication and there is an expectation that educators will post at least one announcement per week over a twelve week term. Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents (22 of 35 or 62.9%) indicated that they post at least 15 Announcements per term, indicating they are communicating regularly with their students and meeting the minimum requirements.

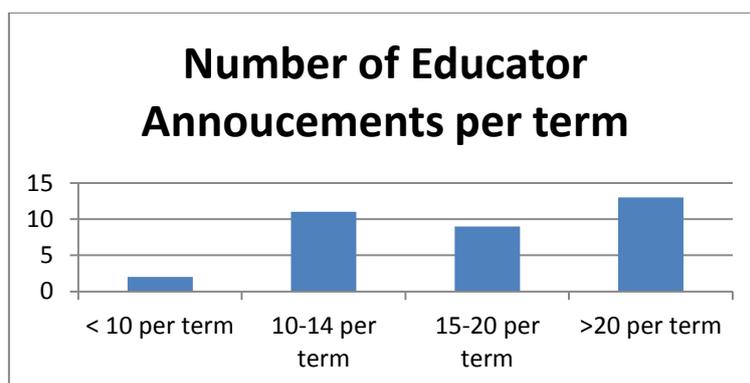


Figure 1: Number of announcements per term

Figure 2 shows the comparison of perceived numbers of announcements, sorted by VET and HE sectors, with a summary of actual posts taken from quantitative analysis of discussion forums for all FD subjects over the full 2011 academic year (707 groups in total). This comparison shows that the perceived situation has quite a different pattern to the actual situation. The most likely explanation for this is that those educators who did respond to the survey are those who are more dedicated and engaged and hence will be in the group who post more frequently. Some respondents may have answered this question taking into account the expectation that staff will make weekly announcements. Different trends between VET and HE for both perceived and actual results, can be seen, with VET staff overall having a lower engagement than HE staff.

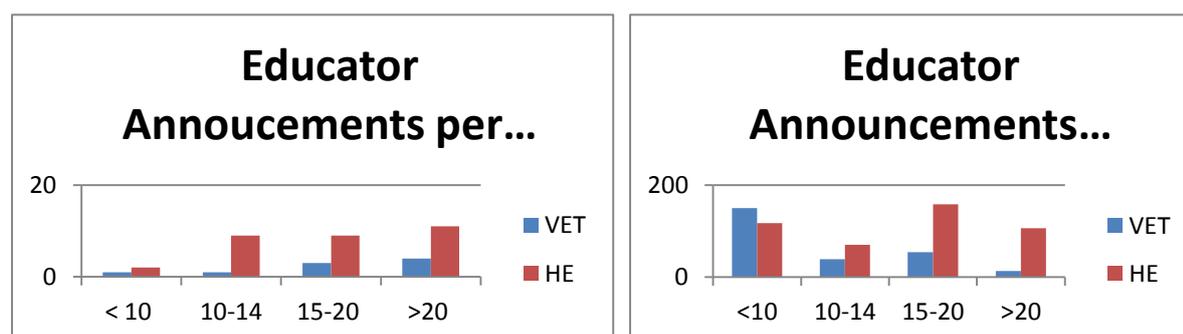


Figure 2: Comparison of perceived and actual announcements

Staff were asked to rank from 1 (most used) to 6 (least used) the most common uses of discussion forums by themselves and their students. These results are summarised below. One pleasing aspect of these responses is the perceived low level of discussion about administration and process questions, as this tends to suggest that both staff and students either have a good understanding of these areas and /or that the discussion forums are not considered the most suitable forums in which to raise these questions. Of concern though is the fact that community building is towards the bottom of the priorities for both staff and students.

Most used by educator

1. Weekly announcements
2. Introductions
3. Responding to assessment questions
4. Responding to content questions
5. Community building
6. Responding to admin and process questions

Most used by students

1. Assessment questions
2. Content questions
3. Introductions
4. Weekly announcements
5. Admin and process questions
6. Community building

The survey also asked a series of questions in regards to educators' current ability in all aspects of discussion forums. Results are summarised in Table 2 which suggests that the majority of staff are comfortable with the fundamentals of using discussion forums and responding to students as well as the more difficult tasks of encouraging critical thinking and summarising threads. The main areas of concern for staff are in encouraging those students who are not actively participating in the forums, whilst also dealing with those students who dominate a discussion.

Table 2: Current Ability

	Very limited	I can get by	I feel comfortable with this	I do this regularly	This is one of my strengths
Start a new discussion thread	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (13.2%)	19 (50.0%)	14 (36.8%)
Post a response	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (10.5%)	20 (52.6%)	14 (36.8%)
Engage students in discussions regarding content	1 (2.6%)	4 (10.5%)	14 (36.8%)	13 (34.2%)	6 (15.8%)
Summarise a discussion thread	2 (5.3%)	2 (5.3%)	19 (50.0%)	8 (21.1%)	7 (18.4%)
Encourage students to think critically about the content	1 (2.6%)	4 (10.5%)	13 (34.2%)	13 (34.2%)	7 (18.4%)
I am able to lead a discussion	0 (0%)	4 (10.5%)	10 (26.3%)	15 (30.5%)	9 (23.7%)
Encourage students who are not posting to the forums	4 (10.5%)	10 (26.3%)	10 (26.3%)	11 (29.0%)	3 (7.9%)
Deal with students who dominate a discussion	1 (2.6%)	8 (21.1%)	21 (55.3%)	4 (10.5%)	2 (5.3%)

Table 3 illustrates responses in regards to student engagement on different levels. Of particular concern is the perception that there is limited engagement between students (73.8% of respondents rated this as very low or limited) and with the content (58.3% rated this as very low or limited), as these are the areas in which most learning would be expected to be occurring. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of actual usage is currently underway which will allow a comparison between perceptions and reality.

Table 3: Student engagement levels

	Very low	Limited	Satisfactory	More than I would expect	Very engaging
How do you rate the percentage of students from each group who engage in the online discussion forums?	8 (21.1%)	16 (42.1%)	10 (26.3%)	3 (7.9%)	1 (2.6%)
How do you rate the number of postings from students?	6 (15.8%)	18 (47.4%)	11 (29.0%)	2 (5.3%)	1 (2.6%)
How do you rate the engagement of students with each other?	7 (18.45%)	21 (55.3%)	8 (21.1%)	2 (5.3%)	0 (0%)
How do you rate student's engagement with course content through the discussion forums?	3 (7.9%)	18 (47.4%)	13 (34.2%)	4 (10.5%)	0 (0%)

The survey included six open response questions which were grouped as most important uses, most effective uses and professional training/support needed for staff and students. Figure 3 indicates the range of responses from staff for the questions regarding usage. It is pleasing to see that most staff consider community building and critical thinking/enhancing learning as the most important uses. Questioning is considered the most effective use for both student learning and engagement. The fact that staff consider questions posed by themselves as the most effective use for learning and engagement could suggest that a student-centred approach to learning is not being adopted and/or that students don't take the lead in posing questions

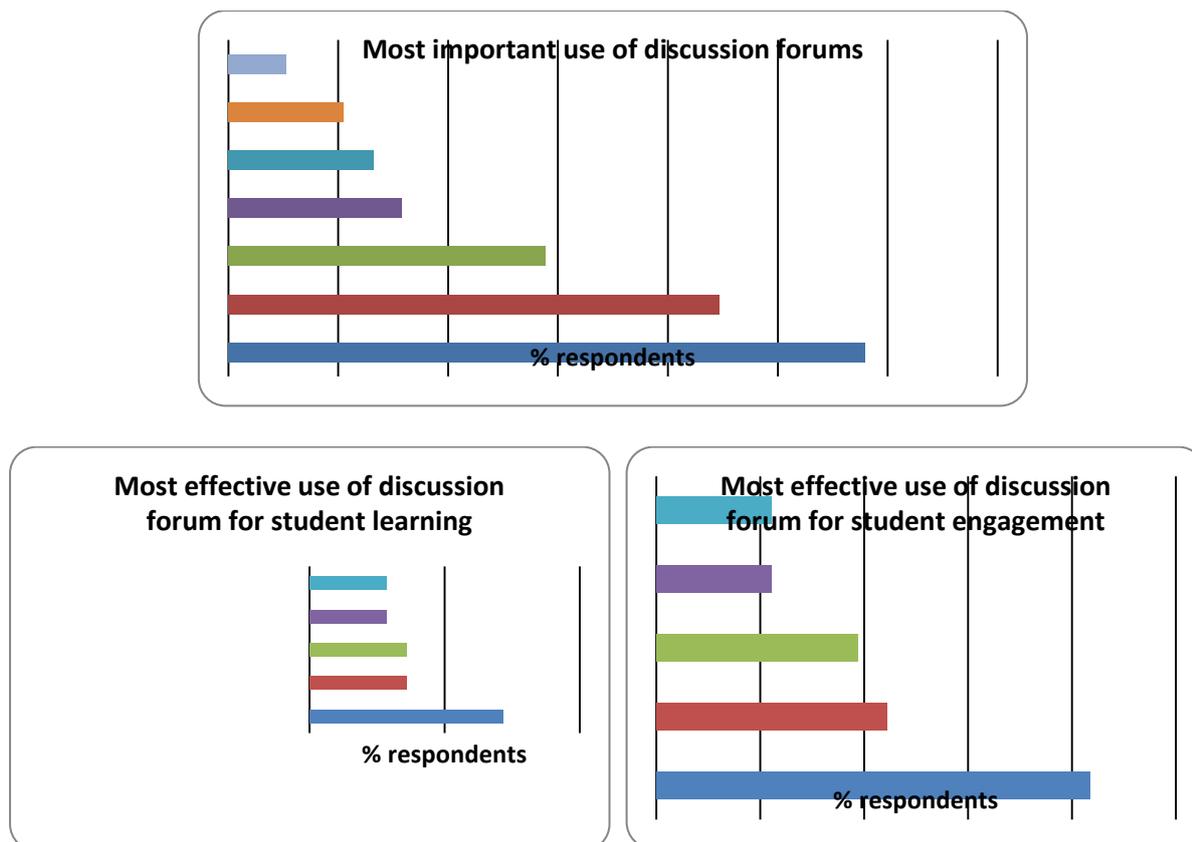


Figure 3: Uses of discussion forums

In terms of staff and student development responses were mainly split between technological areas (28.6% for staff development and 37.5% for student training), for example how to navigate site, how to use other technologies and pedagogical issues such as how to encourage and maintain student participation and engagement (32.1% for staff development). For student support some main areas suggested were in explanation of why it is important to engage and indicating levels of participation expected (25%). There was also support for student training to occur as part of an orientation programme before the start of term (18.8% of respondents). 14.3% of respondents indicated they have either completed the FoLTO² course or are currently participating in this or other training and just 7.1% indicated they did not wish to receive any training. It is interesting that there is no mention of workload issues at all in any responses, especially as this has been mentioned in informal conversations with some educators, and this is also in contrast to other studies.

The final question gave respondents the opportunity to make any further comment on any aspect of discussion forum usage. 54.3% of respondents offered the opinion that there needed to be some compulsory (and possibly assessable) component to encourage student participation and engagement. Other suggestion made were providing expectations of participation levels, having more structure and including more interactive learning materials. Some of the main issues raised included students lacking in confidence to post; students being too busy or not interested in participating and participation rates dropping during term, especially when assessment items are due.

² FoLTO is a recent initiative within the College for staff development (Foundations of Learning and Teaching Online course). This is a 12 week course offered to staff new to teaching by FD. The course is run completely online, giving staff experience at being an online learner.

Analysis of responses

This section discusses two sample areas of the survey, indicating the depth and breadth of analysis that has occurred from the survey – space does not allow for in-depth analysis of all questions.

Making participation compulsory

Whilst there were many respondents who advocated for discussion forums being made compulsory and or assessable there was at least one person who expressed caution in their comments for the final question “With a unit with a compulsory test component this has changed the nature of the discussion forum, where students are often wanting their responses to be marked, discourages free flowing thought”. This is a comment worth considering when determining if forums will be made assessable – does this affect the learning and free flow of thought – will students concentrate on those forums that are compulsory in detriment of others.

Profile of two extremes

The variety of responses to the open response questions indicates that staff do view the effectiveness of discussion forums in very different ways, which is consistent with previous literature. Whilst there is a small minority of staff whose responses indicated only superficial engagement with the forums, a large proportion gave detailed responses regarding the most important use, often suggesting multiple uses of the forums. Examples of responses from the extremes are: “Assessments and Introductions” which contrasts with

I use the Unit Announcements forum for content postings and information. I view the Discussion Forum as a space where building of a learning community can occur. I believe that connection between the students counters the isolating aspect of FD. A space in which any concerns, thoughts, questions can be shared and there can also be sharing of resources. I invite all students to participate as I believe it adds to the richness of the learning experience.

The responses to all questions in the survey (including those not discussed elsewhere in this paper) from the two staff who offered the above responses were analysed to develop profiles of the extremes of perceptions that currently exist within the College.

The first respondent has very limited experience, engages with discussion forums for less than two hours per week over 4-5 days and makes 10-15 announcements, are comfortable with most aspects of discussion forums, perceived student engagement on all levels to be limited, indicated that Introductions were the reason they most used the discussion forums and assessment questions the reasons most used by students. They initiate 80% of threads, contribute to 100% of threads, yet 50% of student posts were unanswered by anyone, and only 20% of students actively participate. From a list of other tools (email, podcasts, LiveChat and teletutorials), they considered only emails as less effective than discussion forums. They believe that discussion forums will only be more effective if “... they are linked to overall grade...”. They felt they didn’t need any staff development as they “did FOLTO it was brilliant” and believe that students don’t need any training or support.

The second respondent has been teaching online for less than five years, engages with the discussion forums for more than three hours per week over 2-3 days and make 15-20 announcements. They are comfortable with all aspects of the forums, feel only student engagement with content is limited, all other aspects being satisfactory or better. Introductions are the ways in which forums most used by themselves and students and Announcements are least used by educator and community building by students. They initiate 50% of discussion threads, 50% of their posts are unanswered, whilst 30% of student posts are unanswered. They indicate that they contribute to 100% of threads and only 25% of their students are active participants. Teletutorials and podcasts are more effective than discussion forums, email about the same and they don’t use LiveChat. For the open-ended questions they offered in-depth and insightful responses, suggesting use of structured activities and linking to resources as motivators for student engagement, engagement levels decrease as assessment tasks are due and that both staff and students would benefit from more support and development.

The first profile indicates someone who does not see much, if any, value in using discussion forums in their current format. This would indicate a Level 1 teacher (Biggs & Tang, 2007) or a teacher with low level conceptions of teaching and learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). Whilst this profile can be thought of as somewhat alarming it does give us much food for thought on how progress can be made on the journey to effective discussion forums. Their response regarding staff development indicates it will be important to take a

holistic approach and that one initiative by and of itself will not be enough to reach that goal. One focus for staff development for teachers at this level "...needs to be on helping staff examine and change their conceptions of teaching and learning" (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996). The second profile, in contrast, indicates someone who engages well with the discussion forums and their students, is comfortable in the online environment, believes there is some room for improvement in levels of student engagement and that ongoing support and training for staff and students is important. This would put them Level 3 (Biggs & Tang, 2007) or someone with sophisticated conceptions of learning and teaching (Trigwell & Prosser, 1996).

It will be important for the College to acknowledge these differing opinions and ensure that educators are kept informed of any developments that occur as a result of these responses and subsequent recommendations. As well as explaining what is happening, it will be important to indicate why changes have (or have not) occurred, otherwise staff may be left with the impression that their opinions are not valued. The following section of this paper outlines some of the initiatives that have commenced within the College.

What is already happening

There are a range of initiatives that have been implemented in the College which include

- FoLTO – as already mentioned this is a staff development programme, implemented in 2011, with 3 intakes having occurred. Analysis of the effectiveness of this course is the subject of a separate research project.
- Tech Talks – a recurring series of seminars/webinars for educators around effective use of educational technologies covering both pedagogical and technological aspects.
- Guides for students – both SoC and VET have developed and distributed brief guides regarding effective online discussion posts
- Curriculum design and learning design – as new subjects are developed and existing subjects revised, wording of activities and instructions for postings are being adapted to encourage engagement. e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) and constructive alignment principles (Biggs & Tang, 2007) are influencing these changes.

At present many of these initiatives have begun in a particular school or unit, with little co-ordination or visible institution-wide plan. It is hoped that this research will inform development of a College-wide plan, including setting of sustainable expectations, and overarching philosophies and good practice guides. The effective use of discussion forums is just one (though very important) aspect of learning and teaching online, and these principles could also be adopted for other aspects of learning and teaching.

Conclusions and future actions

This section first discusses the specific aspect of engagement with announcements, as an example of how this journey can begin, and then moves to some suggestions for the big picture. This survey is merely the first step and many of the ideas for the road-map will not become clearer until further research is completed.

The relatively low levels of engagement with announcements could be addressed by providing all educators with clearer expectations and the pedagogical reasons for this; exemplar announcements and guidelines of the content and timing of announcements. These points have already been incorporated into the FoLTO course. There is an argument that teachers who post more than 2 announcements a week, particularly later in a term, may be inhibiting student engagement and critical thinking and this is an area that could be further researched by comparing student results and feedback across different styles of educators. Reducing the input from educators later in term would be in line with moving students through the five stages of Salmon's e-moderating model (Salmon, 2011). It is also likely that these educators are early adopters of technology rather than part of the mainstream staff (Wilson & Stacey, 2004) and that this level of posting would not be seen as sustainable by the majority of staff. A more effective use of educators' limited time could be to facilitate student engagement in the discussion forums rather than the one-way transmission of information through the Announcements. This could also act as a way of decreasing workload through reduced number of posts whilst also increasing quality of engagement and depth of student learning (Anderson et al., 2001). Quantitative data cannot tell the full story (Beer, Clark & Jones, 2010) so this study is only the beginning – qualitative analysis of discussions forums in a pilot group of first year subjects is now being undertaken to determine what type of interactions are occurring, who is participating in the discussions and how much learning is happening.

Discussion and debate will be encouraged within the College to determine what pedagogical frameworks and educational philosophies will be adopted. Once this is resolved and all aspects of the larger research project are

complete, a series of recommendations will be developed and distributed to senior management. These will include recommendations for future staff development and support; student support; setting of expectations and benchmarks for staff and students and increasing awareness of these, including why they are being adopted. The issues of assessment and compulsory participation; curriculum and learning design, and developing and adopting good practice guides to support any changes will also need to be addressed. This will hopefully enable a holistic approach to improving the effectiveness of online discussion forums. Important areas for ongoing research will include looking for any correlations between engagement and results as well as any links between teacher presence, student engagement and retention.

Whilst this study has been mainly about collecting data, the larger picture is to use this information to inform future practice and decision-making within the College. A picture of the current environment has been formed, which shows that engagement levels are relatively low, there is a wide range of perceptions of the effectiveness of online discussion forums and there is a call for staff and student support. Our challenge as we move forward is to develop a sustainable model that will develop the best possible online learning environment for our students.

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