

Enabling and engaging students within an e-learning environment using WordPress

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Thank you for your interest in this poster. Within this work we have aimed to demonstrate how, as a module team, we have utilised a collaborative andragogical approach and WordPress as an e-learning platform to support students to develop new insights and a deeper appreciation of how change has occurred and affected the occupational therapy profession.

Background

Within the Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) pre-registration undergraduate curriculum, the level 5 'Concepts and Frameworks in occupational therapy' module builds on a level 4 module 'Foundations of Occupation' enabling students to explore and critically examine the political, economic, legislative and socio-cultural drivers, from the mid-18th century to the present day, that have influenced contemporary occupational therapy practice. By exploring the development of the principles and practices of occupational therapy within health and social care from a historical and contemporary perspective, the module aims to provide students with a contextual understanding of how and why the profession and its' theoretical concepts have developed to not only meet society's health, social and educational needs, but have also enabled occupational therapists to embed occupation and occupational participation/engagement and performance as its core concern of practice. Wilcock (2003) states "historical sources can illuminate how occupation, in its broadest meaning, is entwined with the social history of economic change, government initiatives and policies."

From early in the development of the 'Concepts and Frameworks in Occupational Therapy' module, workbooks and electronic resources were planned to be central to student learning alongside more traditional learning and teaching strategies of keynote and interactive lectures and seminars. Initially the use of a reading diary that students would share with tutors was considered. Within this resource students could record the information they had sourced and gain formative feedback on their engagement with the literature. However, on reflection, given the large amount of information available on the themes of the module, it was felt that this could be both intimidating and overwhelming for students to approach individually and, from an academic point of view, maintaining an overview of each student's diary could be difficult for a small teaching team. Appreciative of the need in the current information age to move pass simply acquiring information which is easy to access, toward curating and evaluating information, we explored the possibilities for students to populate an artefact with evidence of the historical, economic, legislative and socio-cultural drivers that have influenced both the development of health and social care and occupational therapy practice over time. We remained mindful that we wanted to engage our students in a process of collaborative discovery.

The following points were considered fundamental to enabling a collaborative approach to learning:

- The setting of clear learning outcomes
- The use of small group work rather than whole cohort teaching
- The setting of tasks that would challenge ideas and support deep learning
- A repository that could store a range of documents and media
- A platform that could easily host on-line discussion forums
- Accessibility to the platform from any stationary or mobile device

The university's virtual learning environment was first considered as a platform however this only allowed for links to topics and sites with no clear associations or progression between each of the subjects thus failing to illustrate the interrelated story of the development of key concepts and frameworks that have influenced occupational therapy over time. The team reviewed alternative platforms and WordPress, a free blogging tool, which enables greater creative and collaborative management of content was selected.

The Concepts and Frameworks WordPress site was set up as a private site and could therefore only be accessed by the students within the cohort and their lecturers. By sharing their resources on the site the students not only have access to their own research, but they also have access to the research of their wider cohort. This range of available data would not be available if the students were to work in isolation during their investigation as they would have insufficient time to achieve this breadth of work. Shared findings and experience of sourcing and gathering the information is then discussed in the classroom. This allows for the module team to clarify misconceptions and elaborate on important concepts.

All students were given editorial rights to the site to enable them to upload information into the various pages on the site, including their own research of a given topic, images and links to internet sites. Student handbooks on how to post information, blog and edit their entries were provided. The use of small group work on a task with a shared goal creates the opportunity for peer learning environments to be nurtured. Peer learning can enhance personal and professional skills including communication, time management, trust building, decision making and where necessary conflict management, and thus can contribute to preparing students to meet the challenge of working with others in a range of settings and contexts. In support of this, clear expectations regarding site netiquette were outlined, students were reminded of the necessity to comply with university conventions, professional regulations and legal requirements in relation to copyright and ownership.

According to Silius and Tervakari (2003), the usability and utility of any e-learning platform including the tools, tasks and appearance is fundamental to the success of any e-learning environment that support a student's learning. Furthermore, Anderson and McCormick (2005), identified ten principles for pedagogic e-learning which included learner engagement and inclusion, innovative, but effective learning, and the use of the platform for both formative and summative assessment. During the first delivery of the module, an on-line audit utilising the Bristol Online Survey tool, based on nine of Anderson and McCormick's (2005) ten principles, was developed to evaluate students' perceptions of how the platform, content and learning activities had enabled their engagement in the learning process to successfully meet the module's learning outcomes to their level of satisfaction.

Results – Illustrative Qualitative Feedback

For those students who affirmed that using WordPress had enhanced their learning, there were four emerging themes:

Increased confidence

“Increased my confidence in discussions and my understanding of what I have learnt. I realised the value of discussions in aiding my understanding.”

“I become calmer when presenting information, as I got used to the process I didn't panic as much and gained confidence in my ability.”

Enhanced learning

“I have been able to see things from other people's perspectives”

“It has allowed me to have a wider range of knowledge. Others comments and findings have allowed me to have a base line and give me ideas for further research.”

“There is information there should we need to use it for our assignment. I think this is a good way of successfully getting us to do our home study activities in a way that can be monitored. This helps motivate us to spend our time away from the classroom constructively. I have however found it has taken me a considerable amount of time to answer the questions.”

Enhanced searching skills

“...finding and filtering information to put on the site and accessing info to back up your view on topics for discussion.”

“Research skills have improved, I looked up how to research as it took me so long at the start, by the end I was more efficient. Therefore, it allowed me to identify and correct this area of my learning in order to enhance it.”

Enhanced IT skills

“It has been good to experiment with a different resource”.

Where students did not feel that the WordPress site had enhanced their learning there were minimal comments:

“...by the time I have finished my own research I have found it hard to motivate myself to look and see what other people have found.”

Students comments on the ease of use of WordPress formed three emerging themes:

Learning new technology

“scared” “quite frightened” “quite daunting”

“...just because the technology is there, do we have to use it at all?”

Personal benefit

“how would it [the information], all piece together?”

“I am enjoying the interaction between my peers and my tutor, it allows everyone time to give their own opinions, which would not be possible in a timed lecture situation”

Using the Wordpress functions

“Navigating and exploring the site functions could be time consuming, but once established this became progressively easier with use.”

“may have been helpful to have been shown this in class”

Comments where students had enjoyed using Wordpress, there were two emerging themes:

Enhanced learning

“It is a very interesting way to learn, and a good resource to keep coming back to when needed. What others have found allows me to use this as a basis for my own research and will come in handy especially when I am researching for my assignment.”

“It was interesting and engaging to create a common piece of work to assimilate a large amount of information.”

“Now I have used it more, I can see the benefits, sharing the information has been useful.”

“It is a good way of displaying information that we can all contribute to and access.”

“Information presented has increased my knowledge and I have found out stuff that I never knew.”

Ease of use

“I found it easy to upload material, discussion boards were easy to use.”

“Another resource, quite easy to use, lots of information.”

“It was a new experience with regards to the live discussions, which I found were exciting!”

Where students had disliked using Wordpress, there were two emerging themes:

Relevance and sharing of the information

“I think it is a good resource for sharing information, however, some people have put a lot more effort in than others which has been a bone of contention for some, considering information and references can be used for the assignment”

“I have found it very hard to know how much work we are meant to do on the topics. I have found it has taken me a long time to find the information I am looking for the time-travel questions, which has meant that by the time I have done the work on that I am finding it very hard to motivate myself to look through and see what everyone else has written too.”

“However I do wonder if all the work was relevant.”

Recommendations following the 1st evaluation

- Combine the Editor's and Blogging handbook into one handbook
- Improve the layout of the site
- Remind student of the need to paraphrase and reference in the correct style
- A practical session on how to use WordPress to be facilitated early in the module with programmed assistance during early self-directed study sessions
- Module lead to explore the use of the discussion board as a contribution to the overall module mark
- Add 'how to..,' on-line tutorials to the site
- Add a FAQ page

Subsequent evaluations

Further module evaluations have indicated that the majority of students find co-creating the website enhances their knowledge and understanding, however a few continue to ask for further advice and direction regarding the functions of WordPress.

Additional Comments on the ease of use of WordPress

'A useful tool to be able to share ideas and opinions'

'I can do it anytime, anywhere and this I find really useful'

'I think that it is only through using the site it will become easier to use'

Our insights from this engagement with e- learning

Tasks need to be designed carefully to promote collaborative working otherwise some students will try to work on their own. When group members perceive that their learning is linked with that of their peers a sense of positive interdependence is fostered. Each peer group needs to be clear about its research tasks and be able to measure both the individual efforts of each of its members and the groups joint progress. For collaboration to be effective the group must be accountable for achieving the tasks set and each member must be accountable for contributing his or her share of the work. This needs to be monitored and where necessary supported by members of the core teaching team. In conclusion, WordPress has provided a collaborative, creative learning space that can be customised and developed to meet student's learning.

References

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