



Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

Vol. 3, No. 1.

ISSN: 1473-8376

[www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste](http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste)

PRACTICE PAPER

## **‘Carry on Talking’: Developing ways to enhance students’ use of online discussion forums**

**Crispin Dale** ([c.dale@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:c.dale@wlv.ac.uk)) and **Andrew M. Lane** ([a.m.lane2@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.lane2@wlv.ac.uk))

University of Wolverhampton  
Gorway Road, Walsall, WSI 3BD, UK.

DOI:10.3794/johlste.31.62

© Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Education

### **Abstract**

There has been a large increase in uptake in the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) within higher education, including within Sport, Leisure and Tourism. VLE frameworks such as the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF) have become an integral part of the delivery of courses within some institutions. Encouraging students to engage with the VLE in an interactive way, rather than simply downloading material represents a challenge for lecturers. Previous research has proposed a three-tier model of engagement which progresses from the downloading of lectures to a fully interactive framework. This paper describes issues related to student usage of more interactive VLEs and proposed practical guidelines based on recent experiences. It is suggested that there is a need for more rigorous evaluation of engagement with VLEs.

**Keywords:** virtual learning environments, Internet, student engagement, online discussion

### **Introduction**

Higher education is going through a rapid transitional process whereby education moves from traditional face-to-face delivery and paper-based distance learning, to online provision (Nelson, 2002). The development and usage of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to enhance learning is therefore an area of significant development in the delivery of UK higher education (see Haven and Botterill, 2003 for a review). Haven and Botterill (2003) provided an evaluation of the VLEs that are currently used in HE institutions in Sport, Leisure and Tourism. Examples of the proposed benefits for lecturers identified through this evaluation included:

1. the notion that the quality of discussions between students and lecturers can be improved due to reflective interaction;
2. the ability to reach a large number of students;
3. more assured communication channels with students.

---

*Crispin Dale is the course leader for the MA Tourism Management in the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure at the University of Wolverhampton. His current research interests focus on the use of technologies to support learning.*

*Dr Andrew Lane is Reader in the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure at the University of Wolverhampton. During the course of writing this article, he also worked for the Centre for Learning and Teaching, promoting research into teaching and learning across the university.*

Haven and Botterill (2003) emphasised the importance of effective management of VLEs, as rapid change can be associated with stress among both students and lecturers.

Current provision of online courses is proposed to involve three stages (see Haven and Botterill, 2003). The basic approach is a 'content + support model' in which there is a relatively static body of content that provides the core of the course, and this is supplemented by tutorial support with a low level of interaction. Second, there is 'wrap-around model' in which course materials are 'wrapped' by activities, online discussions, etc. This is also referred to as a '50/50' model, because online interactions and discussions occupy approximately half the students' time. At the third level, there is an 'integrated model' which is a resource-based model, where the course is defined by collaborative activities, discussions and joint assignments. The course content is dynamic and is determined predominantly by individual needs and group activities. Participants and/or tutors make resource contributions as the course progresses.

## **Usage of online information**

Hall (2002) described how students are encouraged to use the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF), which is the University of Wolverhampton's VLE. Dale (2003a) described how WOLF is used widely within the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure as part of the implementation of the University's Technology Supported Learning strategy. Hall (2002) outlined how students are encouraged to use WOLF, leading to student engagement at a level consistent with a content and support model. Hall's (2002) paper describes the process through which a lecturer can initiate student usage of a VLE through the downloading of lecture material. Dale (2003a) argued that the use of VLEs as a deposit for class content, such as lecture notes and overheads, is a minimalist approach to its use, but is a common one in the initial stages of engagement. However, this renders the VLE as a substitute for the dissemination of class materials and fails to fully embrace the functionality that a VLE can bring in enhancing the student learning experience.

## **Use of interactive material**

Recent research has evaluated students' use of interactive online materials (Dale, 2003b; Lane, et al., 2004). Lane et al. (2004) developed online methods of feedback for use among sport, tourism and leisure students through the use of multiple-choice tests. Over 500 students had access to such tests via WOLF. Results indicated that over 95 per cent of students used WOLF, but the percentage of students that used the differentiated tests was low (21 per cent of students accessed difficult tests and 13 per cent of students accessed easy tests), suggesting that lecturers should encourage students to engage with interactive material, rather than simply downloading lectures. The findings of Lane et al. (2004) are consistent with low trends of student usage of VLEs reported by Batey (2002), although she was referring to more basic engagement, rather than interactive engagement.

WOLF incorporates an online discussion forum which is a virtual arena where students can discuss topics and issues that may have emanated from a lecture, an in-class workshop or a research seminar. Discussion forums are able to sustain the continuous learning process between staff and students and amongst students themselves. This occurs by offering students the opportunity to engage in debate 'anytime, anyplace, and anywhere'. In addition, very few information technology skills are required to set up an online discussion. An example of this is illustrated in Figure 1, which is a screen-shot for the module Impacts of Tourism, where a number of discussion topics were set up to generate lucid debate amongst the class, outside of the contact tutorial time. Discussion topics focused on issues that had been discussed in the tutorial sessions, such as the impacts of all-inclusive resorts, the effectiveness of economic impact measurement techniques, and so on. The discussions would ultimately assist students in the development of their final assessed work. It was also anticipated that students would set up their own discussion topics once the online debates were underway. However, Dale (2003b) found mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of these online discussion groups among undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Dale (2003b) reported that students rarely engaged in online learning forums. He reported that motivating students to use the online discussion groups is one of the main challenges for lecturers. It is often the case that the better performing students engage in the debates, whilst the remainder of the class either offer limited debate or fail to engage at all. Lack of engagement could be due to a number of reasons, such as poor motivation, low self-confidence in relation to the knowledge required, or students anticipating feeling embarrassed if their peers interpret their work as poor.

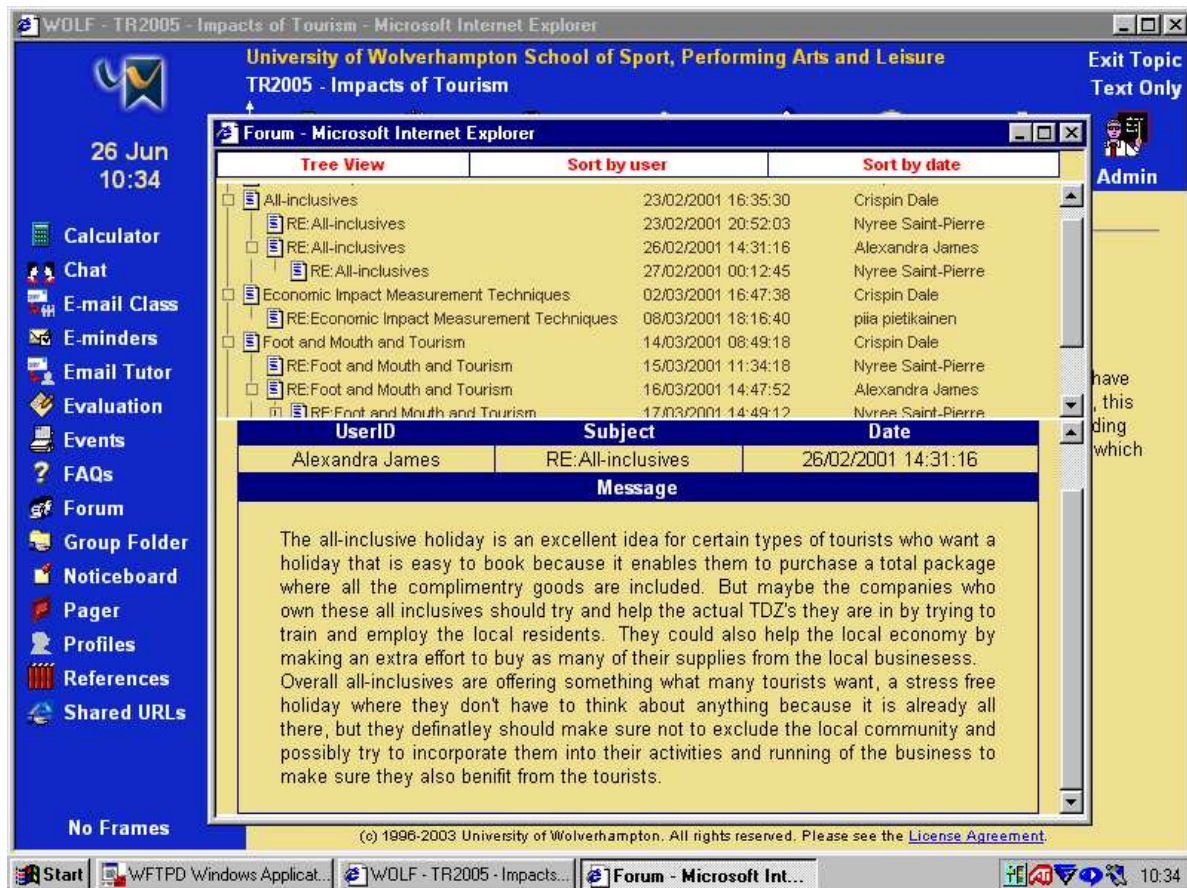


Figure 1: Screen-shot for a discussion forum on a tourism module

The present study builds upon the work of Dale (2003a; 2003b) and Lane et al. (2004), and describes a strategy for promoting the use of interactive forums on the WOLF platform. The strategy is based on the content of modules in sport sciences and tourism, and was developed through critical reflection on how to move forward in encouraging students to use VLEs interactively. Given the value lecturers place in the development of online material, and an increasing awareness that the delivery of higher education programmes will increasingly use VLEs, there is a need to identify methods that lead to effective student usage of such material. Our recent work has developed materials such as differentiated tests (see Lane et al., 2004) that students can use. Effective promotion of student engagement with interactive online material could allow students to make better use of such material. The remainder of this paper describes the strategies and the underlying principles that contributed to the effectiveness of this process, so that lecturers from other institutions can apply these in their own online learning developments (see Figure 2).

## Development of a model for effective engagement in discussion forums

The model for effective engagement in discussion forums was developed through a combination of theory and practice and was tested on a module in sport and exercise psychology. Results indicated that approximately 80 per cent of students engaged in the forum, which represents a marked increase on earlier efforts (see Lane et al., 2003). It is acknowledged that this is tentative evidence of student

engagement, but represents a noticeable increase on the figures of 21 per cent and 13 per cent reported by Lane et al. (2004).

1. Integrate information from the online discussion into module delivery.
2. Encourage students to work as part of a team and to place their information in the forum.
3. Synthesise student opinion, show contrasting opinions and comment on the nature of discussion. Positively reward students for engaging in the process.

**Figure 2: Principles for effective engagement in online discussion forums**

## Integrate information from the online discussion into module delivery

An assumption that was made in our previous work (Dale, 2003b; Lane et al., 2004) was that students would engage with the interactive learning material. The logic for this assumption was based on the rapid rate of uptake of information placed on WOLF. Students within the School of Sport, Performing Arts and Leisure have come to expect modules to be available online. The change in culture and the expectation that important information can be found on WOLF has led to pressure being placed on lecturers to provide this material. Thus, it was logical to assume that as students access lectures available on WOLF, they would engage in a more interactive process. This evidently did not happen.

Hall (2002) integrated use of WOLF by changing the module guide so that the module outline included a session on how to use WOLF. Students often take a strategic view of what work is needed and their work can be focused tightly around course requirements. Timetabling students to engage in online discussion forums formalises this type of learning, and placing it within the module guide puts a stronger emphasis on the value of student engagement than encouragement given in the lecture. Findings that show students are good at downloading lectures should not be surprising as the lecture is the traditional way in which the important information is transferred. Students are unsure of the value of engagement in online discussions, and so, unsurprisingly, will show some caution in using these.

We have found that using a case study style approach is useful in initiating interest. Students are presented with issues, for example, in an applied sport and exercise psychology module, some case notes of individuals that described specific problems were provided (see Figure 3). Each example presents a set of case notes for a hypothetical individual, with details of previous assessments and the sport and exercise psychologist's comments. Students were asked to provide practical advice that was based on theory and research, and to write their response into the forum.

While students are given a common problem, they are directed to different sources of information, including importantly, resources that can be accessed by multiple students from the Internet, rather than individually from a library, or a combination of the Internet and the library. Most libraries are not resourced to cater for class sizes of 100 students simultaneously trying to use books or journals. By contrast, many universities have a number of computer terminals that students can access, with some universities providing Internet access for students to use through their own computer. Directing students to different resources might therefore help to alleviate this resource issue.

## Place students into teams and ask them to group opinions to be added to the forum

Research shows that individual performance on important tasks in the presence of an important audience is stressful (Hardy and Jones, 1994; Lowther and Lane, 2002). For example, research has shown that anxiety scores are lower when individuals perform as part of a team (Martens et al., 1990). Terry et al. (2000) reported that feeling part of a cohesive team was associated with positive mood. Lane et al. (2003) reported that student stress is associated with inadequate social support. Thus, developing a sense of belonging could not only reduce student stress, but could also enhance performance through an increased use of discussion forums. We suggest that module leaders should

place students in groups, or allow them to form their own, and students should engage in discussion firstly within these groups, before submitting their written piece to the online discussion forum.

|   |                                 |                       |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Name:</b> Kate Jones   | <b>Date of birth:</b> 23/4/1970 | <b>Gender:</b> Female |
| <b>Case History</b><br>I first met Kate in September 2003. Kate weighed 20 stone and she explained that she was trying for a baby and her doctor had advised her that she should lose weight. She reported that she had always been overweight and hated P.E. at school. She said there were no types of sport or exercise she liked although she had never really participated due to her size. Kate seemed to have little belief that she would lose any weight as she indicated that she thought the weight gain had been down to her genes. Kate has a sedentary job.   |                                 |                       |
| <b>Seminar session</b><br>You are working for the National Health as an exercise psychologist. If individuals can be encouraged to exercise, this would save the National Health millions of pounds in treatment costs. You have been told that a key objective of your job is to encourage exercise uptake. An individual has been referred to you. You have been given some case notes.<br><br>With reference to the individual who you have been asked to work with, use answers to the following questions to help inform your work.<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Is the individual intrinsically motivated, extrinsically motivated, or A-motivated?</li><li>2) Could extrinsic rewards (financial) be used to get the person started, and if so, what sort of reward would you offer?</li><li>3) How would you try to enhance the self-efficacy perceptions toward exercising?</li><li>4) You are trying to get the person to set goals, how would you manage this process and what sort of goals would you encourage them to set?</li><li>5) How would you get them to start exercising?</li><li>6) What would you do to encourage them to keep exercising?</li></ol> |                                 |                       |
| <b>WOLF Reading (you could go to books, journals or internet sources)</b><br>SR3013 module (well done to all those who have logged on so far)<br>Read the lectures:            'Interventions'<br>'Motivation'  |                                 |                       |

**Figure 3: Example of worksheet used to stimulate participation in the discussion forum in an exercise psychology module**

## Providing positive and constructive feedback

Following the first two guidelines suggested above should lead to students engaging in discussion forums as part of their teams. To ensure sustainability of the use of these forums, the lecturer needs to provide feedback, and a summary of the work undertaken. Offering feedback evidences to the student that the lecturer is interested in their comments. The lecturer must be sensitive to the impact of their comments, as negative reinforcement is likely to result in disengagement with the use of the forum. A goal should be to ensure that the student continues to engage with discussion groups. One strategy for doing this is to synthesise student opinion so that it shows contrasting opinions. It is important to encourage students who engage with the process.

As the number of student comments increases, there becomes a need to synthesise this information so that it can become a resource. One strategy for doing this is to remove all comments and place them into a new file with the lecturer's comments. Using this approach, it is possible to show the students that different perspectives are valued. Although this may take a relatively long time, it should be emphasised that the lecturer is creating a resource for the next time the module is delivered. We would argue that collating students' comments should be the focus of discussion within lectures.

## **Limitations**

A limitation of developments such as this is the reliability of the system. If the system fails or does not function properly then students can lose interest and become frustrated. Therefore, effective central support is essential in maintaining the reliability of the systems to ensure the continued use of the discussions. The development of effective communication methods between students and lecturers can help to identify possible problems, because a problem experienced by one student, is probably being experienced by others. Equally, rapid changes in technology often mean that the relative success of information technology supported learning is influenced by the quality of the student's computer.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, we suggest that the discussion forum offers an excellent way in which the lecturer can engage with large class sizes. Lecturers should not assume that because they develop interactive material that students will necessarily use it. The present study proposed a model for encouraging students to engage in discussion forums and groups. Integration of online materials into traditional lecture-based sessions can help legitimise the newer methods. Lecturers need to be proactive, recognise the student's work and provide feedback. Whilst this might be considered additional work, it should be noted that synthesising student comments and adding commentary could provide a semi-permanent resource for students to use in subsequent iterations of the module.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Helen Lane for her contribution to this paper. Helen worked as a visiting lecturer for the University of Wolverhampton and helped develop the worksheets for the exercise psychology module.

## References

- Batey, J. (2002) Web page implementation and cultural change within a first year undergraduate module. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education* 1(1), 51-60.
- Dale, C. (2003a) Getting Over Technophobia: Developing a Culture of Technology Supported Learning in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. *LINK 7 – The Development of Teaching and Learning in Departments*, LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism. Available from [http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/link7/link7\\_3.html](http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/link7/link7_3.html), accessed December 2003.
- Dale, C. (2003b) Carry on Talking: The Use of Online Discussion Groups as a Learning Tool, *LINK 8 – E-Learning*, LTSN for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism. Available from [http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/link8/link8\\_5.html](http://www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/link8/link8_5.html), accessed December 2003.
- Hall, R. (2002) Observations on a Year of Using the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF). *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education* 1(2), 66-70.
- Hardy, L. and Jones, J. G. (1994) Stress and Performance, future directions for sport psychology. *Journal of Sports Sciences* 11, 68-71.
- Haven, C. and Botterill, D. (2003) Virtual Learning Environments in Hospitality, Leisure, Tourism and Sport: A Review. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education* 2(1), 70-92.
- Lane, A. M., Dale, C. and Horrell, A. (2004) Differentiation via on-line learning: Providing steps for achievement. Paper presented at the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, The Nottingham Trent University, 22<sup>nd</sup> April.
- Lane, A. M., Devonport, T. J. and Horrell, A. (2003) Self-efficacy and research methods. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Lowther, J. and Lane, A. M. (2002) Relationships between mood, cohesion and performance among soccer players. *Athletic Insight* 4(3). Available from <http://www.athleticinsight.com/Vol4Iss3/MoodandPerformance.htm>
- Martens, R., Vealey, R. and Burton, D. (1990) *Competitive Anxiety in Sport*. Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics.
- Nelson A. (2002) On-line learning: evolution not revolution. *Broadsheet* 153, March, 6-7.
- Terry, P. C., Carron, A. V., Pink, M. J., Lane, A. M., Jones, G. and Hall, M. (2000) Perceptions of group cohesion and mood in sport teams. *Group Dynamics: Theory and Practice*, 4, 234-243.