Multi-Disciplinary Collaboration in Online Learning

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Introduction

When delivering online postgraduate courses we aim to ensure that learning is applicable to professional practice. An online delivery method allows students to form a community of practice and to appreciate multi-disciplinary perspectives with participants from a variety of professional backgrounds from around the world. However, reduced engagement in collaborative activities can be a barrier to the formation of a community of learning. This poster discusses the redevelopment of an online postgraduate oncology module and outlines the pedagogical and scaffolding changes implemented to encourage genuine collaboration and social learning.

Module Background:
- 20 credit Postgraduate module (Level 7)
- Delivered via Blackboard VLE
- Part of a well-established online MSc Oncology and Palliative Care
- Cohort: Wide range of healthcare professionals, full-time employment and geographically diverse (Figures 1 to 3)

Why did we choose to redevelop the module?

Lack of authentic discussions and student engagement

The activities did not elicit genuine discussions and led to duplicate postings of factual lists. A missed opportunity to learn from each other’s perspectives.

Focus only on summative assessment

Repetitive discussion environment caused students to focus their attention on the summative assessment rather than the collaborative learning process.

Student feedback about levels of reading and independent work

These issues were highlighted in students’ feedback of the module, while students found the content interesting and relevant they found activities repetitive with high levels of independent studying.

Aims
- To reduce independent study time and directed reading
- To increase student engagement and encourage social learning
- To utilise professional experience of participants
- To highlight application to practice
- To improve student experience

Methods

To achieve these aims a range of pedagogical updates were made:
- Students were asked to participate in discussion activities as members of a “virtual multi-disciplinary team” (MDT) – to form a community of learning.
- They were required to discuss their approaches to authentic real-life case studies, applying their own discipline’s perspective to the issues (Hall, A, 2007).
- Case study design emphasised practice in the context of decision making across disciplines and the role of the patient in shared decision making.

Multi-Disciplinary Team

- Introductory activities: highlight expectation of regular engagement and collaboration
- From Independent Learning to Social Learning
- Utilise the range of professional backgrounds
- Focus the case study discussions on multi-professional working.
- Appreciate importance of patient centred care and holistic needs

Scaffolded Discussion and Virtual MDT Meeting

- The initial weeks’ discussions were highly structured to guide the direction of contributions.
- Discussions became less structured and a high level of supportive moderator scaffolding was gradually removed to encourage independent collaboration and critical thinking (Darabi, et al., 2011).
- Final phase: Initial asynchronous discussion leading to a synchronous debate. Students were asked to devise and defend their own management plans during a Skype “virtual MDT” meeting. This required them to recognise other disciplines’ roles in the decision making process as they would in their workplace.

Outcomes and Conclusions

Outcomes of the project were assessed using the end of module student feedback and building on this success, additional aspects have been highlighted for future incorporation and improvement.

The best feature of the module:

The end of module feedback indicated an increased level of student satisfaction. When asked “What are the best features of the module?” 10/12 responses stated the collaborative discussions and further themes, of learning from others’ perspectives and gaining a deeper understanding, were highlighted.

Activities on the discussion board promoted deeper understanding and learning. The Skype MDT session was excellent.

Increased participation and engagement?

An increased level of participation in the asynchronous discussion was evident (Figure 4) with an increase in the number of posts per participant.

Future Improvements

In response to student feedback:
- Run 3 smaller Skype debates - reduce technical issues, improve the sound quality and accommodate more students
- Reduce the amounts of reading
- Include a wider variety of resources which can inform collaborative discussions

Figure 4

The virtual-MDT meeting was run twice at different times of day to accommodate different time zones and one session was recorded for the benefit of students who were unable to make either session.