First year student engagement, discussion forums, and reflections on mentoring practice

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As part of the ascilite community mentoring program, an exploratory study was initiated on the use of discussion forums and online activities for first year student engagement in the life sciences. This was started in first semester and based upon the discoveries made, modified for second semester. The results indicated that outcomes were poor for first semester, and positive for second semester when marks were assigned for the participation in the discussion forums.

Keywords: first year, engagement, discussion forums, mentoring

Introduction

Typically, first year progression rates are lower than second and later years, and this may be due to the significant change in culture from secondary school to university. The style of classes is different, the number of students is generally more, and students are expected to manage their own learning environment. Sometimes the new found freedoms of clubs and societies, on-campus activities and lack of monitoring of student class attendance distract students from the task of being responsible for their own learning. This can lead to students dropping out of class and out of programs after the first few weeks.

Many universities have first year orientation programs to assist students managing their transition to higher education at university, with online resources found under transition or orientation on the university website.

Some reports on student progression at university have indicated that students who feel part of the class or part of a community of fellow learners are less likely to withdraw or drop out of class (Jones, 2000). Orientation needs to extend into the classes beyond O-week activities. First year classes are often taken by students in multiple programs and, as a result of their general introductory nature, tend to have large numbers of students. This may exacerbate the feeling of isolation for students and be an impediment for some to successful transition. Additionally, many universities are increasing student numbers and this leads to even larger first year classes!

One of the authors experience of developing online tutorials for students (Curtin, 2002), and worked with the other author in a mentoring role as part of the ascilite community mentoring program in 2007.

This work reports on some online activities planned to further engage students alongside the academic work in two first year classes (one from each semester), with the aim of increasing retention rates and testing and improving the usefulness of the online discussion forums from the experience gained.

Methodology

Participants

The student cohort was a group of students studying physiology in semester one (HET102) and introductory technology (HET148) in semester two. The details of the size and progression rates are presented for 2004-2006 in Table 1.

Table 1: Historical details of the student cohort in the two first year face-to-face units

	HET102			HET148		
Year	Total	Progression	Per cent	Total	Progression	Per cent
2004	104	90	86	75	70	93
2005	139	113	81	96	79	82
2006	184	136	73	128	104	81

These units were chosen, as they are both first year units, and almost the complete HET148 group coming from HET102 in the previous semester. These classes had been growing in size over the past few years, and the progression rates had been decreasing, as in Table 1.

Materials and methods

The planning and progression of the project were monitored via regular teleconference meetings between the mentee (Melbourne) and the mentor (Auckland) on a fortnightly basis. The mentoring process provided time for reflection, discussion and advice from a different perspective as the mentor was from the discipline area of politics, and the mentee from life sciences. The reflective process was important to ensure that the second semester emerged from the experience and results from the first semester.

We made use of *BlackBoard* and its facilities for managing discussion forums, creating announcements to remind them to participate in the discussions, and to deliver any associated material for the unit or the discussion thread. This was in addition to the usual class material provided on *BlackBoard*.

Results

The first semester unit (HET102) had 140 students enrolled and only two students were engaged with the discussion forum and additional activities. There were two discussion forums opened for HET102. To start the discussion, a question relating to a physiological concept (form and function) was posed. Only two students participated in this thread. The second forum had a similar response rate.

Reflecting on the disheartening lack of engagement, we decided to implement a change for the second semester unit, by introducing some marks for participation in the discussion forums. Additionally, we wanted to focus the discussion around themes that would assist student learning in the unit. We decided upon three themes with associated discussion forums. They were machines (based upon lecture material and an additional short video) in week 4; information web searching (to help with an assignment) in week 7; and laboratory work and report writing in week 10.

The participation rates jumped phenomenally! The first two discussions had 60 participants with more than 90 postings, and the third had 56 participants with 71 postings. The actual posting below related to levers and machines (a topic very foreign to this cohort), yet the insight demonstrated in this posting is typical of many seen in semester 2, in stark contrast to semester 1.

> Scissors are a lever, a type of simple machine. The fulcrum or pivot is between the load and the effort, which makes it a first class lever. But what would be an example of a 3rd class lever; I don't fish so the fishing rod example didn't clear anything up. How could you have the effort between the load and fulcrum? Does a hole-punch use a lever?

Finally, the progression rates for the two units in 2007 increased to 92% from 140 students in HET102, and to 92% from 84 students in HET148.

Discussion

The overall process illustrated the benefit of marks in engaging students in online discussion forums. This obviously improved the participation rate in HET148. The reflective process was integral and led to the addition of focused activities around particular themes also provided a way of relating the discussion forums back to the fundamental learning material in the unit, and was reported by the students as helpful.

References

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