

Supporting Online Communication and Collaboration with Yorkshire

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Supporting Online Communication and Collaboration with Yorkshire

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Overview

This summary guide will give you an overview of various pedagogical models of online communication and collaboration and how they can be supported by the tools found within the Yorkshire environment.

You may wish students to discuss subject topics, continuing the debate outside the classroom for inclusion of the findings in a follow-up seminar. A group of students can share knowledge in an online environment, and, via interaction with peers and tutors, improve subject engagement and so gain a wider and deeper knowledge of the topic on hand. Online communications can also increase contact time with peers and tutors, extending avenues of support and reflection.

Discussion and debate

Scenarios for use:

Use of discussion and debate encourages students to challenge and analyse ideas, views and beliefs, whilst learning from tutors and student colleagues. This approach provides an effective form of teaching and learning, because it caters for the many different learning styles students bring with them to university.

Discussion can take place between the whole cohort, or via groups of students that are separated for study and then brought back into the main topic group. Etiquette for 'free-form' discussion needs to be addressed, and students can be involved in developing their own rules and codes of practice.

A structured debate can make use of defined group roles and 'rules of engagement'. For example, a 'position statement' can be posited, a proposer and opposer identified, supporting team roles established and time deadlines given. Resources to support the debate can also be indicated.

A debate or discussion that takes place online in a textual, asynchronous environment (such as a discussion board, blog or wiki) can leave a transcript which can easily be revisited, unlike the spoken word. Textual conferencing can have explicit structuring of discursive themes or 'threads', and comments can be left on the content by both tutors and peers. This level of organisation can be difficult to manage in spoken discussion.

Asynchronous discussion also enables contributions to be thought over and digested before posting or replying. This can encourage those who may not normally take part in classroom activities to participate, including those whose first language may not be English.

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If students are off-campus, maybe studying a distance-learning programme, online asynchronous tools allow discussion to take place regardless of time zone or geographical location.

Examples:

Biomolecular Archaeology

Biomolecular Archaeology is a third year undergraduate module for archaeology and biology students, which introduces the roles of biological and biochemical science in archaeology.

Student feedback highlighted the “disorganised” nature of the web interface for these resources, as well as the view that the course was aimed at archaeologists, with little account taken of the biologists. The course instructor also observed that there had been limited interaction between the two groups of students. These shortcomings prompted a redesign of the course, with the VLE included in a revised blended delivery approach.

The rationale for using the VLE was based on the two 3rd year cohorts that the course instructor was teaching on this module, which had very different backgrounds. The course environment aimed to serve as an interface between the two, making the VLE an attractive tool. The course director found he could direct the student learning experience in different ways, which wasn't possible in standard web-based courses.

To promote interaction, ideas sharing and support between the two disciplinary groups, a shared discussion board was implemented. Other discussion boards were used to support student learning outside class sessions. A 'Help' board was set up as a forum for archaeologists to question biologists and help them access the lecture notes, providing guidance on test questions and vice versa. An additional discussion board was also set up for archaeology students to pool their resources together for the seminars.

On the whole, the use of the VLE and discussion boards was successful, with students reporting that they felt that the VLE had potential to allow a greater degree of interaction between pupils and between pupils and lecturers.

Coronary Heart Disease Online

This module required students to discuss the implications of risk assessment for patient care with peers and the tutor.

The learning approach involved three key stages, namely the mastery of theory, the application of theory to practice and then a wider critique of practice. The VLE helped to structure the course materials and case studies around these stages,

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with discussion and reflective tools also employed to help students to share their experiences and engage in the critical evaluation of practice.

Course participants were divided up into 3 tutorial groups in this course, and each assigned a discussion board to reflect on the issues arising from patient histories. For instance, in Case Study 1 students got to grips with a range of risk assessment tools and within their tutorial groups they discussed how these should be applied in patient consultations.

A general discussion area for all students to exchange ideas on the key themes of the course was also set up. This was used at the beginning of the course to cover induction information and throughout the course to share ideas across tutorial groups. A further discussion board was set up during the consolidation week to reflect on the outcomes from the course.

The tutor's role was crucial in reviewing discussion activities in the online tutorial groups. The use of summary posts, which highlight the contributions of group participants, was helpful in reinforcing good points and identifying those students who had made a useful contribution, and in the same way exposing free-riders who had not engaged. Discussion boards which are not moderated often become places for 'one-shot' comments, rather than locations where students construct understanding by critiquing the contributions of their peers and relating their thoughts to previous posts. The tutor can help students to think more deeply about their comments, as well as to work in a collaborative way by posing questions and drawing out themes for group discussion, which have been touched on in previous posts.

Critical evaluation can be hard to get going face-to-face, and class-based discussions can be very rapid, but using the VLE can slow down the pace, facilitating a more insightful discussion. Students can also revisit the transcripts for revision at a later date.

Knowledge sharing and collaboration

Scenarios for use:

Knowledge can be shared across a group of students via the construction of a textual archive. Tutor-student or peer discussion archives can be valuable for developing knowledge beyond 'how' or 'why'. A knowledge base can be continued and shared throughout cohorts, building into a library of useful resources.

Online collaborative group activities can expose students to working in a team environment, developing group-working skills. Online, small group numbers usually work best with clearly-defined and relevant tasks that develop and build on existing knowledge and skills. Enough time should be allowed for groups to complete tasks satisfactorily, taking into account the demands of face-to-face activities and classes.

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Co-operative, collaborative and group project work can be used for grounding and clarifying topics, brainstorming shared objectives, and exploring and generating solutions to specified problems. Group members learn to allocate and share tasks and take responsibility for individual contribution to a team, alongside group-working processes such as tracking, creating and revising document versions.

The self-documenting nature of asynchronous discussion opens up the possibility of allocating marks for an individual's contribution to a collaborative process, which has strong pedagogical validity as it emphasises the importance of participation in a group project.

A wiki is specifically designed to accommodate collaborative document creation, such as knowledge bases and group reports. One group-working scenario is where collectively the students are responsible for the design and flow of the complete document, but each individual is responsible for creating a wiki page of content on a specified topic. This maintains a focus on individual contribution within the overall group project.

Knowledge can be shared a wider community of practice online, by inviting subject experts to contribute to discussion as virtual 'guest speakers'. Using the Internet, this could be someone who cannot easily visit the campus in a face-to-face manner. This can be an excellent way for students to develop ideas and obtain expert feedback. However, the experience can also be daunting for both students and the expert, especially if they have not taken part in an online discussion before. The guest speaker may need a 'lead-in' introduction, and a few students may be encouraged to seed the discussion with questions and comments to start it off. It could also be that the expert starts a discussion with a prepared paper, or rounds up an open discussion by summarising and drawing issues into a report paper.

Students who are in the later stages of study can also contribute to discussions, validating their own knowledge and contributing to the learning experience of a cohort.

Examples:

Core Knowledge, Values and Engagement Skills

For this module, the collaborative group work spaces in the VLE were identified as a potential means for students to develop a broad subject knowledge base, in addition to helping to foster improved critical skills (namely in evaluating sources and synthesising information), team work and negotiation skills and the ability to be self-managing and accountable to one another. Wikis were used to effectively support collaborative student research to develop a shared knowledge base, as an alternative to traditional tutor-led approaches. Internet-based VLE-enabled communication was also considered favourable for supporting students between classes and crucially, while on placement.

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In the initial class session students chose three topics from 15 available, overall forming 15 topic groups with different memberships – each of which was embodied in a wiki within the module site. Wikis were preferred for their relative transparency of user participation and version history, in addition to ease of use and flexibility of access. Each topic wiki, while belonging to its members, was viewable by all other students who could also leave comments. Groups researched their topic and developed an increasingly concise resource within the wiki over the duration of the module, including a placement period. Students were inducted to the wiki tool in a whole class activity in which wiki construction was modelled by the tutor, and students summarised the assumptions that could be made about the cohort's nursing practice in a class wiki. Specific ground rules were also agreed for the wikis including not attaching files or inserting hyperlinks to ensure efficient reading.

The online group work and collaborative writing still proved challenging to students who had experience of both online group work and the VLE, particularly where negotiation occurred in text, without the immediacy of face to face communication. The success of the approach promoting self-management in students relied on supportive, frequent guidance from the tutor along with well-considered links between class, online and placement environments.

Evolutionary Ecology

This module utilised eight group work areas, consisting of group wiki and blog tools, which were configured using adaptive release group membership rules, so that the areas were visible and accessible only to group members. The blog was intended to help the group communicate in the preparation of a weekly report. The wiki was also restricted to group members and used for collaborative report writing and the presentation of the weekly report, of which there were eight in total. Each report had a separate wiki page, and was expected to be a short summary of 350 words of main text with references.

A wiki tool (read-only) was used as an online 'Text Book' to present the group reports to the class, which were organised into nine chapters, reflecting the organising themes of the course. On a weekly basis, the course instructor uploaded the group reports to the online Text Book with some brief comments added to the entries, serving as commentary and feedback.

Students were expected to spend an average of no more than 2-3 hours working on the group report each week, including time for literature searching, reading, writing and editing. Each group then nominated a representative to make a short presentation in class, outlining the topic that they had researched for the on-line textbook, which was built up over the duration of the course. The group presentations were intended as 'tasters', to let the class know what they could expect to read about on-line. At the same time, the presentations enabled the instructor to address any problems or difficulties that had been encountered during the week's research activities.

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Via the induction session, students rapidly got to grips with the collaborative tools. The technical skills required to use these tools are not high and can be addressed in induction activities, which model the way that students will use the tools for the on-line coursework. Students encountered greater challenges in acquiring the learning competencies to provide feedback on each other's work, to edit and critique contributions from group members and engage in collaborative writing.

Formally assessing contributions is not the only way of getting students to participate online. Where a strong group ethic is established and individuals are accountable to their peers, such as in this module, they are likely to engage in collaborative tasks. Students need to understand the relevance and value of their online work and receive some reward for their efforts. However this reward does not have to be a mark, but could be feedback from the instructor or a useful output, such as co-developed resources to support their revision process.

The course instructor's role was crucial in tying together the online and class-based learning processes, making sense of the learning outcomes emerging from the on-line work and linking them to the theoretical concepts presented in the course lectures. The visibility of the instructor was important for the online activities in monitoring and acknowledging student efforts and providing feedback where appropriate.

Support, reflection and peer review

Scenarios for use:

Asynchronous textual tools with a commenting function can aid support in a one-to-one or one-to-many scenario, supporting lectures, laboratory work, field trips, assignments and individual study. Some students may not feel comfortable asking for support in a face-to-face environment, and continuing support outside the classroom enable questions to be asked privately. Also, some queries are only considered after the lecture or seminar, so allowing online contribution enables these questions to be posted when relevant to the learner.

If using textual tools in a supportive role, it is important to get the language and 'tone' correct to put the participants at ease. This may also involve letting users know that informal language can be used in this situation, and that spelling errors will not be penalised. The transcripts created via textual communicative tools can be used for peer assessment, as well as self-evaluation and critical reflection.

An archive of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) can be constructed, enabling just-in-time support that can be built up over a period of time, and even across cohorts. This can alleviate workload for tutors and confusion for learners.

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Individual reflection can be supported via the use of blogs, commented on via peers and/or a tutor. Probing questions can aid further reflection on study and progress, supporting self-evaluation.

If using, for example, a wiki for a group collaborative project, a blog can be used alongside to facilitate ongoing team discussion on the project work. This provides a space for students to highlight problems or issues away from the work area, and the tutor can also be involved to help solve these and keep the project running smoothly.

Peer discussion can be used to create a self-help scenario, where experienced student 'mentors' can give help and advice. Peer review of work can also be utilised via the comments facility, but clear guidelines need to be set as to how work will be critiqued to prevent abusive, non-supportive or desultory comments. The peer review process can help clarify the aims and objectives of the assessment undertaken, as learners have to be clear on the criteria they are looking for in other students' work.

Examples:

Coronary Heart Disease Prevention Online

Blogs were used as reflective learning logs, serving as a location for students to reflect on their progress in tackling course activities. They represented a safe and private place where students drafted questions on course content and activities, and receive personal feedback from their tutor. This helped to engage students in critical thinking and to test out ideas, helping them to gain confidence in their work before contributing to a tutorial or plenary discussion forum.

Each student was given an individual blog space, with viewing access restricted to their tutor only. The blog was intended to be used as a personal journal to record observations on each of the patient case histories. In fulfilment of the tasks set out in the case study area, students were required to make entries in their journal about the patient's health problems, and were encouraged to highlight key findings and pointers for a care plan. Tutors then reviewed the entries and provided one-to-one feedback on each student's work in this space.

A 'coffee room' blog was also set up for general course discussion. The commenting function was used for one of the blog posts to set up a tutor-free space, where participants could discuss aspects of the course and support each other. Tutors periodically checked the forum to ensure that it was being used appropriately, but did not intervene in the discussions.

It was essential to clarify what students expected in terms of the scope and frequency of feedback from tutors. Guidelines were established and a consistent level of feedback delivered to students across tutorial groups. Regular feedback is essential for distance learners, who seek reassurance on their progress to ensure that they are on the right lines with their research and evaluative assignments.

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New Media and Society

This is a second year undergraduate module for Sociology students, which explores a range of sociological accounts which analyse the emerging properties of the Information Age. The introduction of an online component to the module provided students with an opportunity to critically reflect upon new media by using it. Students were asked to publish a minimum of three entries per week on a personal blog, and were expected to create a 1000 word entry on a new media concept within the course wiki tool. In addition to these tasks, the cohort was expected to use the communication tools within the VLE to support the collaborative preparation of workshop presentations. Each week, 2-3 students were expected to take a lead in discussing a workshop topic by preparing a PowerPoint presentation and then delivering a short 20-minute presentation, with peers contributing feedback and engaging in discussion after the workshop within a dedicated wiki space. Participants from different workshops were encouraged to deliberate and share information on a topic which they would later give a workshop presentation upon. These activities were intended to provide a link between the on-line and class-based learning.

A plenary forum discussion board, entitled 'Questions and Queries', was set up for ideas sharing and discussion. Students were also allocated a workshop wiki space to prepare their presentation and to invite comments and feedback from peers after each workshop session. The wiki allowed the members of a workshop group to edit web pages and add content. A commenting area was also switched on to invite feedback from the rest of the class on the wiki pages for each group.

A class wiki space was set up to host a collaborative glossary of new media concepts, and was referred to as a 'Mediapedia', along the lines of the more famous 'Wikipedia' model. Students were able to select a concept and then create a web page definition, which they linked to the concept on the main page. This became a student-created just-in-time support site.

A course blog was created to be a reflective journal for the class. It enabled each student to create multiple journal entries which were visible to all. Entries were dated with most recent contributions shown first. Students could include web links within an entry to point to interesting articles, websites etc. On each entry there was a comment space, to encourage students to discuss the 'new media' themes presented in the blog entry.

The tutor found blogging to be an effective tool for ideas-sharing and engaging students in the exchange of learning resources. Interaction between students and critical discussion of entries was more challenging to deliver - this requires careful management by the course instructor.

The virtual presence of the instructor within the module site was a motivating factor for students to participate on-line, and a key factor in the early stages of the blended module in encouraging students to use new tools and engage with the VLE.

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Yorkshire Tools that facilitate online communication and collaboration:

In order to support both individual and group communicative online learning activities, three main tools are employed in the Yorkshire VLE:

- **Discussion forums**
- **Wikis**
- **Blogs**

Discussion forums

Discussion forums can be used to support debate and collaboration on specified topics. They are threaded, so 'strands' of conversation can be more easily followed. Messages are 'posted' to threads and replied to by other contributors, so creating a transcript of the interaction. In-class discussion can be continued, leading to deeper learning and exploration of topics. Group members can be given specific 'roles' by the moderator.

Yorkshire provides a searchable, threaded discussion board facility that can include file attachments. This can be used at module or content area level, with the content area option the most flexible and commonly used. Moderation can be enforced, which means that a participant's message will not be displayed unless approved by a moderator. Threads can also be 'locked' which means that new entries cannot be made, but the transcript of the discussion is still available to read. A 'starred' rating system for posts can also be utilised.

Wiki

A wiki is an online collaborative web-based document that can consist of several pages. A typical wiki can combine text, images, links to other online materials, web pages, and other media related to its topic.

The wiki tool can be used at module or content area level, and can be linked to the Grade Center for assessment purposes. This tool is also searchable, and supports a dated history of page revisions. Particular groups of students can be allocated to a wiki, and dates and times set for editing rights. Wiki pages can also be commented on by peers and academic staff.

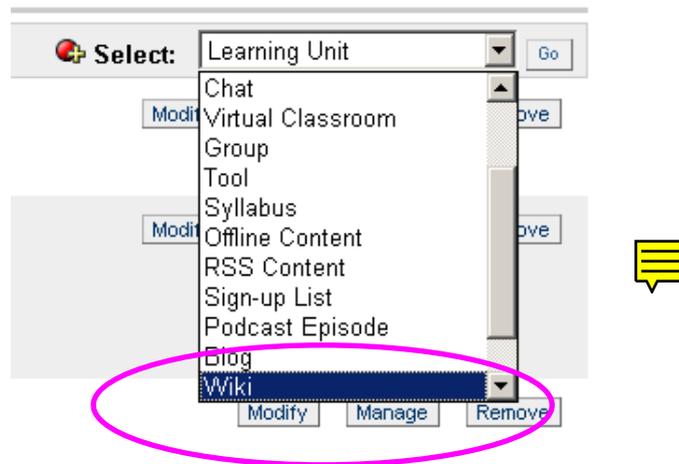
Blog

Some learning outcomes require that learners reflect, comment and analyse the group or individual learning process, according to specified criteria. This can be facilitated by the blog (web-log) tool, where students can keep an online 'diary' or 'journal'. Each entry into a blog is typically dated and discrete from other entries with the entries generally displayed most recent entry first (reverse chronological order). Entries can be commented on by tutors or peers, which also opens up the possibility of peer assessment. A typical blog entry can combine text, images, links to other online materials, web pages, and other topically-related media.

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A searchable blog tool is available on Yorkshare that utilises comments. Blog contributions can be limited to certain students, or subsets of students. Blogs can also be set up so that students cannot see each other's entries if so desired, allowing for personal reflection. Again, blogs can be used at module or content area level. A Grade Center entry can also be associated with a blog.

Blogs, wikis and discussion boards can be included in a content area by selecting them from the drop-down menu at the top right of the screen in 'Edit' mode.



These tools can be configured and managed via the Course Tools section of the Control Panel.



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Further Information:

On the Yorkshire HQ site, there are dedicated guides on:

- Set-up and use of Discussion Forums
- Set-up and use of the Wiki tool
- Wiki interaction models
- Set-up and use of the Blog tool
- Introduction to e-moderation
- Using Discussion Forums
- Using a Blog (student guide)
- Using a Wiki (student guide)

There are also dedicated training sessions available on 'Groupwork and Collaborative Tools' and 'Facilitating Online'.

Teaching and learning using blogs, wikis and discussion forums:

These tools are all asynchronous and textual, meaning that students can access them online at a time and place of their own choosing, and can consider the discussions and their own contributions at length before posting their replies or submissions. This can help students whose first language is not English or with certain accessibility issues.

However, some users - both students and staff - can find the lack of visual cues very inhibiting to conversation. Without facial expression it's easy to misconstrue humour as an offensive comment, for example. Users can also be worried about posting text in a public environment - do they need to spell correctly or reference? Obviously the answers to these questions will depend on what you wish the students to achieve through use of the tools - is the conversation casual or is the finished piece of work meant to be an academic piece of writing?

These issues can be resolved to a greater extent by publishing ground rules of use, or 'netiquette' in advance. These can be decided by the tutor or agreed between students. A set of 'copy and paste' netiquette instructions available for use on a module site can be found at the Yorkshire HQ site (<http://vlesupport.york.ac.uk>), under the 'Guides' tab. These instructions can be modified to suit your needs.

Another important consideration is that online communication and collaboration needs to be an integral part of your course design; students need to know why they need to do this activity (how it links to their coursework and learning) and what they will get out of it (e.g. an assessed piece of work, peer support, a library of research materials etc.). If this is not clear, students will opt not to undertake online activities. For example, if a discussion board is added to a module site with the instructions 'use this to discuss your group project', it is very

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likely that campus-based students will not find the impetus to use it as they can meet face-to-face (distance-based students may find this more useful).

In order to keep an online discussion or conversation running and on-track, regular contributions by the tutor are needed. The tutor can:

- model how they wish the students to interact online,
- help to create a positive and supportive culture by recognising contributions and giving feedback,
- reinforce connections and links between topics,
- question further and prompt for reflection,
- monitor and referee contributions.

This is called online facilitation and more information about this vital role can be gained via the 'Facilitating Online' training session, the dates and times of which can be accessed via the 'Training' tab at the Yorkshire HQ site (<http://vlesupport.york.ac.uk>).

It is very important to give students a guideline as to when and how often tutors will be responding online at the start of the activity – some learners can expect a response within five minutes of posting a contribution, even at three o'clock in the morning! Managing student expectation prevents both tutor overload and student disengagement when replies are not received immediately. Of course, this is especially important when dealing with a globally-distributed cohort due to time differences.

For further information on using blogs, wikis and discussion forums, there are dedicated guides and training sessions that can be found on the Yorkshire HQ site (<http://vlesupport.york.ac.uk>), or please contact the e-Learning Development Team based in the Projects Office in the Raymond Burton Library.

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When designing online communicative or collaborative activities, another important consideration is how groups or individuals will interact in your chosen environment (blog/wiki/discussion board):

	A 'singular' group: module-wide or individual	Separate, smaller groups: work not visible to other groups	Separate, smaller groups: work visible to other groups
Tutor ownership	Single environment for the whole module group that only an instructor can edit. Students can view the environment but not make changes. Commenting can be on/off.	Each group has an environment that only an instructor can edit. Commenting can be on/off. Other groups can't view the environment.	Each group has an environment that only an instructor can edit. All module students can view the environment. Commenting can be on/off.
Group ownership	Single environment for the whole module group. Students can edit the environment. Commenting can be on/off.	Single environment per group. Only students in that group can edit and view the environment. Commenting can be on/off.	Single environment per group. Only students in that group can edit the environment. All module students can view the environment. Commenting can be on/off.
Individual ownership	Each student has their own environment that only they can edit. Students can only view their own environment. Commenting can be on/off (for instructor and student to use).	Each student has their own environment that only they can edit. Students in the same group can view each other's individual environment. Commenting can be on/off.	Each student has their own environment that only they can edit. All module students can view the environment. Commenting can be on/off.

More information about group work and the associated tools can be gained via the 'Groupwork and Collaborative Tools' training session, the dates and times of which can be accessed via the 'Training' tab at the Yorkshire HQ site (<http://vlesupport.york.ac.uk>).