Evolution of Master's Essay Writing: developing peer-review assessment through WebLearn

Introduction

Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, and Lettitia Derrington, Department for Continuing Education, have introduced peer review as an aspect of assessment for the MSc in Evidence-based Health Care. They have designed appropriate forums and topics using the WebLearn Forums tool to serve this purpose. In this innovation they have demonstrated the capabilities of a VLE to facilitate essential research training for students who act as peer reviewers of each other's work.

Challenge

In providing students with the experience of an editor perspective, Jeremy and Lettitia sought a way to strengthen their students' experience of the research-teaching nexus. They also wanted to provide them with training in the process of academic publishing. This is particularly important, since the students on this course are encouraged to seek publication of their essays. One further challenge was that part of the assessment process for this MSc takes place through distance learning. Effective use of a virtual learning environment was therefore essential. As Jeremy explains: *"Nobody has yet developed a way to combine (a) the benefits of students giving each other formative peer review feedback, (b) the benefits of WebLearn for ease of student interaction, and (c) a process to establish the teaching-research link and reap the benefits thereof."*

Innovation

Jeremy and Lettitia designed a process using WebLearn forums that allowed students to interact as peer reviewers of each other's essay assignments. A forum was created, containing a topic for each student. The students were invited to post a new thread for each of the three stages of their assignment over a period of three weeks: proposal, outline, draft. At each stage, students were asked to submit their own work and also act as peer reviewers for others. The forums were supervised by the module coordinator. Instructions were detailed in html pages on the WebLearn site and also sent as announcements.

Feedback

100% of students were active participants and the feedback was universally positive. One student wrote: *"Thank you. [I] have never had a teacher give so much help and input before…I wish I had had teachers like you in the past."*
Other module coordinators have expressed an interest in using the same model for student peer review.

Top Tips for Success

Jeremy and Lettitia's tips are divided into three key categories:
Preparation:
1. Students will rarely have experience acting as peer reviewers, so explain the process carefully.
2. Label the forums and topics clearly.

3. Send reminders at each stage of the peer review process.

Supervision:
1. The goal is for students to provide feedback to each other, so supervision is only a supportive function; the head tutor needs to monitor and facilitate the process.
2. In the case of inappropriate or insufficient feedback from students, the head tutor needs to intervene with clarifications to the peer reviewer (e.g. suggestions on how to provide constructive feedback) and the student whose work is being assessed (with further comments).
3. Provide general formative feedback to all students at each stage of the process.

Assessment:
1. Ask the students to evaluate the assessment strategy and process of peer review in the feedback for the course.
2. Communicate with the WebLearn team to see what WebLearn innovations might be forthcoming.
3. Modify, adapt, improve for next year!

Further Information

Join the WebLearn User Group for guidance and collaboration.

Use the IT course catalogue to find courses to support the use of WebLearn.

Runner-Up for the OxTALENT 2013 Award for 'Use of WebLearn to support a course or programme of study'.