

**Introduction to the use of Discussion Board for first year
undergraduates on BA (Hons) Sociology and Sociology/Criminology**

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Keywords: Developing discussions; sharing ideas.

Introduction

Sociology involves the development of skills in discussion and debate, and in developing logical, coherent and internally-consistent arguments both orally and in written work. Teaching the subject must integrate the development of these skills and the learning context must provide opportunities for students to discuss and debate with their peers and lecturers.

Why use Blackboard?

The limitations of lecture and class time mean that inevitably discussions are cut short or not allowed to develop fully. Hence, Blackboard can be used as an additional aspect of the teaching programme which can enhance the development of these skills. The students can then either use the system to become involved in discussions and debates on-line or simply share ideas on the themes and topics of the module.

How Blackboard was used

The Discussion Board section of Blackboard was used as the main vehicle to encourage e-learning use by students as this appeared to be the most suitable means to get students engaged. It also enables asynchronous usage so that student can access the system during times most suitable for them and at their own pace.

Themes and topics were linked to each teaching week of the module. Students knew the areas to be covered in advance via the module handbook and teaching schedule. The first session involved an hour long induction to Blackboard and how to use the system. Each week a set of questions, ideas, discussion points were posted on the Discussion Board and students were expected to access these and post at least one response prior to the seminar

and lecture. Students were also informed of the rules for using the Discussion Board and that I would be watching but not necessarily intervening in their discussions.

Outcomes

In practice the first few weeks were the most successful, with the majority of students participating. As the semester progressed there was a decline in some student's involvement in discussions. The general character of the discussions was also fairly descriptive and non-analytical. However, a hard core of students continued to post messages throughout the duration of the module. Others said they didn't necessarily post messages but did log on and read what others were discussing (hidden use).

Recommendations

For the future my aim would be to integrate the themes and topics more centrally into the teaching of the module so that students could more clearly see the links. Also perhaps to have an element of assessment linked to the use of the Discussion Board. The nature of the discussions was perhaps related to the level of first year undergraduate study, but I would be hoping to improve the evaluative, analytical and critical content of student input. Putting students into groups prior to the setting up of the use of the Db would address the issue of only accessing the system as an individual and encourage more interaction between the students.