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Chapter 3B. Using posters in a Level 3 student centred module in Marine Biodiversity: Web based versus Traditional?

Background

This module was set up several years ago in illS, and is known as Honours Special Study. The idea behind the module was that students would be given a briefing and would then be responsible for producing several assignments by group work on a presentation, group work as a poster and individual work as an extended essay, in this particular case on a topic under the umbrella title of 'Marine Biodiversity'. This module was previously called Honours Special Study -the Deep Sea. When I arrived in IBS in 2003, the Director, Dr John Fish said that it would be a good time to have a change of topic and so Dr Bell and myself decided on the change to Marine Biodiversity as this seemed to be a particularly hot topic at the time and also was sufficiently broad to allow a wide range of topics which would give the students plenty of choice. The first year we ran the module we stuck to the prescribed formula of a group powerpoint presentation, a group produced web poster which was submitted electronically for us to mark and also individually submitted extended essays.

The Innovation

After the first running of the module (Spring semester 2004) we decided that it would be a better strategy to get the students to make the posters in the traditional way rather than using a web based format, and we decided to also run a poster session and get the students to talk about their contribution to the poster-this of course also allowed for students to view each others posters and therefore interact with each other, ask questions and to gain an appreciation of what other groups had been doing. I felt particularly that students needed to have an appreciation of what made a good poster and what made a bad poster! Only by looking at the work of others would they be able to gauge and reflect on their own performances. I found many useful tips on planning poster assignments and sessions in 'The Lecturer’s Toolkit' (Race, 2002).

Students were given a brief about the poster with such details as size, dates of submission, font size and also an explanation of what would happen at the poster display session. Students were asked for feedback through course questionnaires, at the end of the poster session, I specified that it would be particularly helpful to know what they felt about the poster aspect of the module- what did they think that they had learned from the opportunity provided to them?

Results

In order to analyse the effects of the innovation it is necessary to go back to the marks attained by the students of the web based method and make a comparison there. I feel however, that it is also necessary to bear in mind that the marks attained from the two methods were from different year groups, however, it is still useful to make the comparison as the students undertaking the course were generally mainly from the Marine and Freshwater Biology degree scheme and so had the common interest of that, also this degree scheme usually has students with a wide ability range so it would be interesting to see if this method was useful in such in terms of their motivation and group skills.
Summary table of marks for students with traditional posters for the two cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Essay Talk (25%)</th>
<th>Poster (25%)</th>
<th>Total (100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>15.03</td>
<td>31.13</td>
<td>61.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>14.23</td>
<td>30.43</td>
<td>61.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reflection and Further Developments

It is clear from these results that the students attained better marks in the posters using the innovation methods. Feedback from the students was positive and selected comments are included in the poster submitted as part of the portfolio.

In reflection:

• The innovation helped enormously in terms of encouraging the interaction between students and also between students and staff.
• It facilitated much discussion around the topics and increased student confidence in expressing their opinions.
• It is difficult to draw conclusions from the marks of the two cohorts as these groups may have been at different ability levels at the outset but there appears to be an improvement in marks for this type of approach.
• Student feedback revealed that the poster session enhanced their learning experience and provided opportunities for reflection that were not previously available.

Further developments:

• It would be interesting to get students to develop their own criteria for marking the posters and poster presentations, this would enhance their reflection processes further (Race, 2002).
• It would be interesting to get students to then use these criteria in a peer assessment situation again to encourage reflection (Race, 2002).
• Would be fun to have a conference style environment having tea/coffee available to make more of an occasion and prepare for similar experiences which students might encounter in the workplace (Race, 2002).