'INCENTIVISED READING'-USING AN ONLINE VLE TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT AND ATTAINMENT IN STUDENT LEARNING

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Abstract

Lecturing to large groups (250+) of students can be challenging, and it can be difficult to know who is engaged and coping with the work and who might be struggling. Previously, students on this first year, first term module were not formally assessed until the beginning of the second term by multiple choice question (MCQ) exam, and concerns were that for some, revising for these exams could be the first time that they would read over their lecture notes or consult the textbooks.

The transition into undergraduate study can be hard so in order make the students revisit their lecture notes soon after the lectures were given, and to encourage them to do the suggested textbook reading, they were assessed continuously throughout the term in a fun, interesting and interactive way.

The online VLE, Mastering Biology (Pearson) was used and was associated with the course textbook and marketed to the students as ‘incentivised reading’ consisting of five online assignments throughout the term. The five assignments together contributed to 10% of the module mark. Scores were high for students that completed all assignments and the objective to make them engage with the work was met. Participation in compulsory assignments was very high compared to non-compulsory assignments also available for optional revision. This provided strong evidence for assigning marks for credit.

There is also a smartphone App available that uses a ‘flashcard’ system to show students MCQ questions on chapters of my choice, and it uses an adaptive learning approach whereby topics answered successfully are not seen again (e.g. Mastery has been achieved) and topics that are less successful will be displayed again on repeat of the assessment.

Data from the previous eight years has shown a year on year improvement in both written and MCQ exam results, suggesting that student understanding has improved across the module, although no definitive link with Mastering Biology can be made. The online gradebook can also be a useful tool to identify early ‘dropouts’ or students having difficulty before the formal assessment occurs, so intervention and extra support could be given. Student feedback on this system is excellent and they rate it as a very valuable support to their studies.

Keywords: Student engagement, assessment, VLE.