

Designing for discussion

How we designed an online distance learning course to sustain an active community of learners By Tom Buckley, Ann Grand, Erik Stengler and Clare Wilkinson

Learning online is sometimes pigeonholed as purely self-directed and somewhat lonely; only really appropriate for a passive student, at a distance, getting to grips with highly-theoretical subject matter.

We have run two iterations of our course: 'Science communication: people, projects, events' which is an online-only short course for people interested in developing skills and understanding in science communication. In designing our online course, we wanted to adhere to good practice in teaching and learning. We wanted our participants to be active in their learning and be able to create and share experience and knowledge that could be applied directly to their practice.

The course had very busy discussion boards alongside other online activities. The amount of traffic on these discussion boards was very surprising and the students were very positive about their experiences learning online at UWE.

What our students thought

"Great way to interact with other participants and to learn more."

"Great to start units thinking and reflecting, rather than swallowing information."

"being able to discuss ideas in forums despite not meeting other course mates in person"

"...the forums and wikis. It's been great inspiration for me to see other participants' comments and ideas."

"It's great to share and learn from others"

"having feedback [in the forums] from the tutors was great and the interactions with the other participants were also great"

"I really liked the feedback that was made available for the project wiki and the discussion between other participants was really useful. It felt valuable to have so much input and I really learnt a lot."

We think the following principles were important in making our course such a vibrant community.



Fig 1. Example of signposting of resources and scaffolding of activities

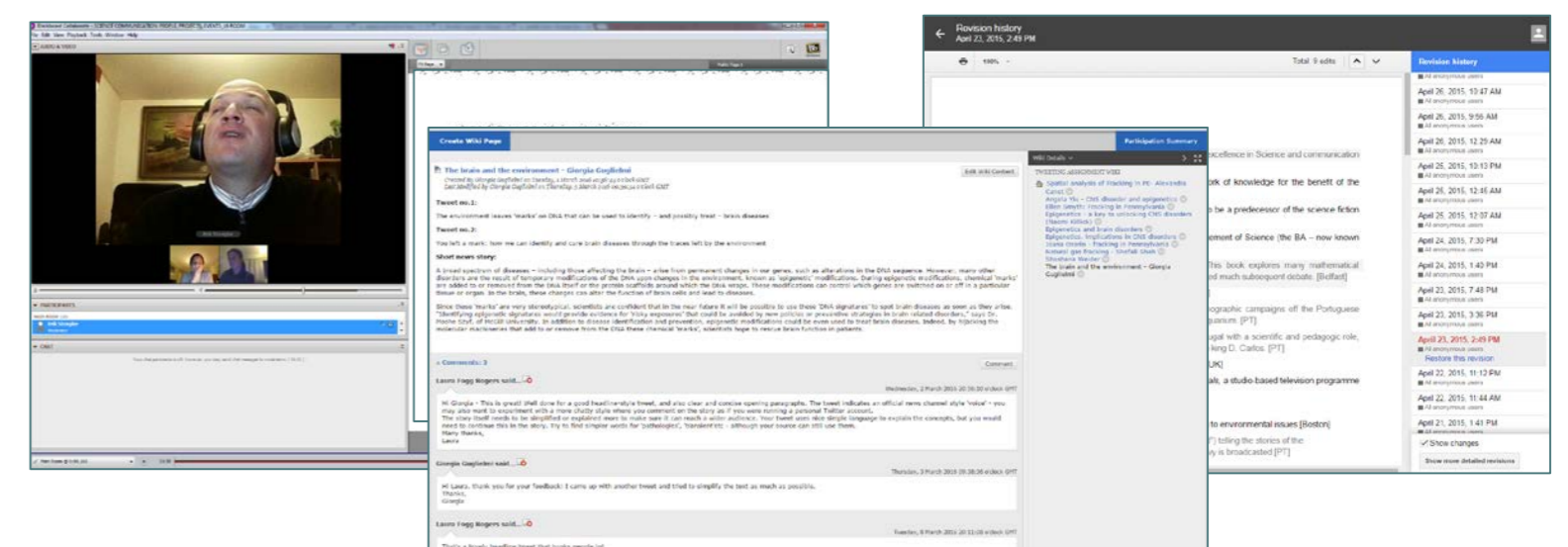


Fig 2. Examples of other online activities

Make it clear & easy for participants

Don't make them guess what is expected

- Make it easy to engage
- Tell them how to engage
- Remove all barriers to joining in
- Give them something to talk about or do

Join things up & think big

Make diverse activities that build on each other

- Discussion should be part of a wider strategy of active learning
- Ensure synchronous and asynchronous activities complement each other
- Employ different tools that align with what you want them to learn

Make a rewarding community

Give them something to log-in for

- Provide incentives to get people in the talking mood
- Invest time in introductions and community building
- Keep the conversation going by responding often.

Make it clear & easy for tutors

Staff need planning and support to be effective

- Plan for and resource facilitation
- Get a team-wide collective agreement on how to proceed
- Look to rotate your squad so no one is overburdened or overexposed

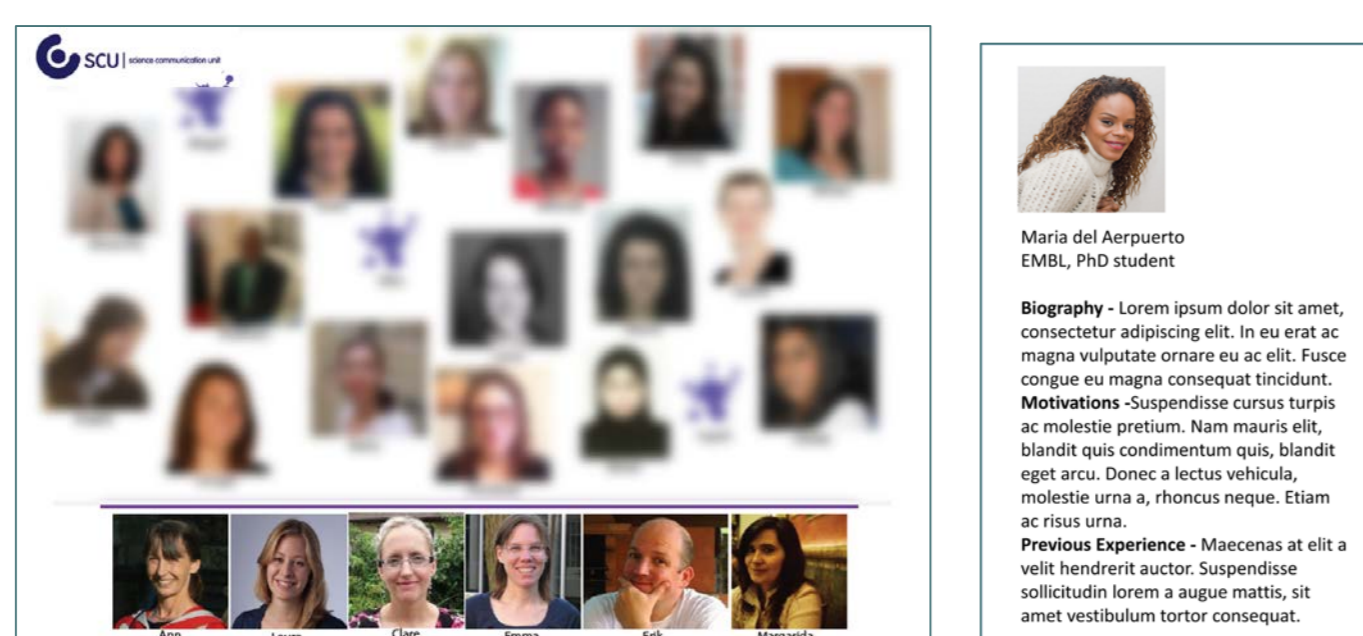


Fig 3. Profile writing and photo wall as orientation projects.

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Education
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