

# ‘To interact or not to interact, that is the question’: An analysis of student engagement with on-line learning activities in WOLF.

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## Background and rationale

Engagement with Wolverhampton On-line Learning Framework (WOLF) by both staff and students is a key strategic priority of the University with the aim to “develop the interactive learning environment”, so by 2005 the “majority of technology-based learning undertaken by learners will involve them in active participation in on-line activities in a media-rich environment” (University of Wolverhampton, 2002). However, current practice within SSPAL has demonstrated that even though some students choose to engage with the interactive learning activities the majority decide not to, and are content with downloading module lectures and notes without reciprocating with the on-line activities that have been developed to assist their learning. This *receiving* but not *giving* approach is in need of further exploration if the power of WOLF is to be fully exploited in supporting and enhancing student learning. The aim of this research was two fold:

- a) To explore the views, opinions and experiences of students who do and do not engage with on-line learning activities;
- b) To use this knowledge to develop learning and teaching strategies that enhance student engagement with on-line learning activities.

It could be argued that engagement with WOLF has predominately been based around what Haven and Botterill (2003) refer to as a content plus support model, where the virtual learning environment (VLE) acts as a deposit for lecture notes and other materials (Dale 2003). However, as a result of previous Learning and Teaching research projects within SSPAL, a number of modules have embraced interactive learning activities including differentiated self-assessment questions (Lane et al., 2004) and discussion groups (Dale & Lane, 2004). Where “interactive” learning tools have been implemented as part of a tutor’s wider learning and teaching strategy the engagement of these by students has often been sporadic and inconsistent (Khutan, 2003, Lane et al., 2004). These studies suggest that there needs to be more rigorous evaluation of engagement with VLEs (Dale and Lane, 2004).

## The Research

Some previous studies in this area have predominately taken a quantitative approach to the analysis of the engagement with on-line learning tools in WOLF (Robert and Simkins 2002, Protheroe and Hill, 2003, Lane et al., 2004). It is argued that the use of qualitative research should be used to gather the views, opinions and experiences of students that would otherwise be difficult to collect using quantitative approaches.

A range of modules within SSPAL now have a permanent resource base of on-line learning activities that students can engage in on an ongoing basis (for example see SR1012, LR1004, TR1008, TR2005, SR3312, SR4003, SR4023, TR4001). The students studying these modules were invited to participate in focus group interviews and the data generated were analysed using thematic content analysis drawing upon common themes.

Three focus group interviews were conducted. The first focus group included eight Level 3 Leisure Management students, the second comprised six MSc Sport and Exercise Science students, and the third comprised six Level 1 Hospitality, Tourism and Event and Venue students. There were ten male and ten female participants in total. It was a deliberate strategy to cover students from a wide range of levels, backgrounds and interests. The small number of participants meant that our findings could not be generalised across the whole population of students but this was not our intention. We were interested in understanding why on-line activities do not engage some students and exploring themes that emerged across student groups.

Students were asked to volunteer to participate in the research project, with the nature of their involvement in the study made clear from the outset. A standardised interview guide was read aloud to each focus group outlining how the interview would proceed (Berg, 2001). The main emphasis was that there were no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view. Participants were asked to listen respectfully to the views of others, even if they disagreed. Before starting the focus groups, participants were asked whether they understood the interview guidelines. All participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of others regarding information disclosed within the focus groups. All participants provided informed consent for this procedure. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for both focus groups. The questions used to guide the interview included:

Examples of questions from the focus groups included:

- Do you know what WOLF is? What do you use it for?
- Are you aware of the activities? If so what? To what extent do you feel you have learnt from using the activities?
- To what extent do you feel WOLF has helped you to succeed in your modules?
- What strategies would help you learn more from using the WOLF facilities?

## Findings

An aim of this study was to explore ways in which students can further engage in the interactive on-line learning tools and thus increase the effectiveness and overall quality of the learning environment. Students provided explanations for usage and non-usage of interactive materials and, with particular reference to WOLF-based learning tools such as 'activities' and the 'discussion' group facilities, they reported that they:

- a) were not aware of them; or
- b) did not like them; or
- c) were used to getting the information somewhere else; or
- d) did not realise the value of the activities.

During focus group sessions, we probed deeper into the underlying causes and found the following factors hindered use of on-line activities:

### Time

Students indicated that issues such as time and awareness of the relationship between doing the activity and the skills needed to pass the assessment were factors influencing their decision to do the activities or not. One Level 3 student explained:

*"But in terms of the on-line activities, I have not done them, because, well I just was prioritising my time. My priorities are to get the case studies done and maybe these activities will help, but I feel restricted on time anyway. All my spare time is devoted to research and my case study and getting that done..."*

*I know that I'm in the third year now I've got so used to it. All I use WOLF for is to get the lecture notes and getting assessment guides. I do not actually look for things like that on the tools menu."*

### **Lack of perceived added value**

Students reported that although they are aware of additional resources, they either found them of little value or they had found other methods of learning preferable. When asked if they might have helped, one student answered:

*"Yeah, it probably would, but the way I saw it your research for your assignment does those sorts of things for you...so rather than sit in front of the computer doing it, you get stuck into habits of looking in books and doing it..."*

*It depends on how confident you are in your own ability. When you see the questions on there, and think, I know them anyway. So there is no point doing them, and you might not use them because you are confident in your own ability that you know what you are doing."*

### **Motivation and incentive**

When we asked students about the extent to which WOLF- based activities should be assessment driven, they responded that:

*"More people would definitely do them, yeah, cos' otherwise it just like work for you, and you are wasting your time putting them on there."*

*"They (the other students) are not going to get it done without a little bit of pressure put under them. If you are going to give us pressure to get it done in a specific amount of time, you have got to do that."*

### **Competition and sharing**

An interesting theme emerged during focus group sessions. It became apparent that students, particularly, undergraduate students were reluctant to participate in activities that required sharing ideas with other students because they felt that by doing so they would be not be given the credit (i.e. grades) for their own efforts. One student admitted that:

*"... in the back of my mind I am thinking that I am giving other people answers here. It is a pretty bad way of looking at things but it is in the back of your mind, you think why shall I tell them anything"*

## **Improvements and future developments**

During focus group sessions we asked students to suggest things that would encourage them to use WOLF on-line activities. These are included in our recommendations below.

### **Relevant content**

The content of the tasks set must be relevant, useful and at the correct level. Of particular importance is the relationship between doing the activity and the skills needed to achieve a successful grade for the assignment in the module. It needs to be clear that the information gained by using WOLF will help students in improving their grades.

### **Rules of engagement**

Students express reservations about identifying themselves when engaging in forum discussions. We propose therefore that participants should be able to remain anonymous and that the lecturer should set stricter guidelines. Discussion groups should have a start and end point and after the discussions are closed, no more points can be added. The lecturer should provide a summary of the key points from students and e-mail or distribute the summary of forum discussions to the whole class, providing praise for those who engaged with it.

## In class use of WOLF

In order to raise awareness of and engagement in interactive activities, it was suggested that some WOLF activities could be carried out in class:

*"I think that sometimes people really don't know about these activities. You know maybe people know they have to, but sometimes people have to go to work or print out letters, maybe it would seem a good idea that the activities are with the lecture".*

## Technical

Any technology based support needs to be easy to use. This includes access from home, and simple structure within WOLF e.g. lecture notes, activities and discussions placed within a weekly structure.

## Summary of key findings

- Initial guidance should be developed to introduce students to WOLF.
- Encourage and monitor regular habits of using WOLF including activities. Include performance on activities as part of the assessment.
- Students are predominately instrumentalist in their behaviour (Dale and McCarthy 2005). Assessment drives student learning and therefore linking the skills attained to doing the activities should correspond with those needed for successful performance in the module.

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