

# An examination of communication by students on Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF) in the teaching of sensitive subjects: Does using WOLF prohibit or promote communication and thus learning?

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## Background and rationale

The use of computer technology to assist communication has soared in the past two decades. Many people in the UK now have access to the internet and use it to communicate locally, nationally and internationally. One method of communication that is increasingly being used in education today is the interactive forum where students can communicate with others by depositing messages on line that their colleagues and tutors can respond to at a later date. Wolverhampton Online Learning Forum (WOLF) is a virtual learning environment where students can access topics that have been set up for individual modules offered by the various Schools in the university. Within WOLF teaching staff can upload class notes, lecture slides, out of class activities, and assess usage and learning through the use of multiple choice questions and access to certain features of the topic. Students in turn can add documents to the *group folder* (a shared folder where a student can upload and download documents themselves) and to the *forum* (a branching discussion board).

The author of this paper is the module leader for the level four Advanced Transcultural Issues module (HL4030). This module is located in the School of Health postgraduate study portfolio. In past iterations of this module it was felt that students were cautious of the comments that they made within class, as anything that challenged current practice was both politically sensitive and might offend others in the classroom. However, research into learning suggests that an open discussion of thoughts and feelings is needed to ensure that students can engage on a deeper level.

In semester two of 2001-2002 this module was not well subscribed to. When assessing the feasibility to deliver this module with those that had registered it was agreed that, weekly sessions would not be run but the module would be delivered via an independent learning approach. Tutorials would be held to discuss content and activities would be developed on WOLF for students to work on in their own time. This would allow for the lecturer's time to be used most effectively and allow the module to be delivered to those who had already registered. This also enabled the lecturer to explore how WOLF and the forum could be used to facilitate the communication of sensitive subjects. During 2001-2 a pilot project looking at the use of this module on WOLF was carried out. This allowed for a full run of the project in 2002-3.

## The research

The primary objective of this project was:

- To assess whether communication of sensitive subjects is hindered or promoted through content analysis of the forum on WOLF and focus group discussion with students

The wider objectives of the project include

- To use BE-ME resources to help stimulate discussion ('BE-ME' is the black and ethnic minority experience oral history project in Wolverhampton – see [www.be-me.org.uk](http://www.be-me.org.uk))
- To develop a deeper conceptualisation of the issues to consider when using WOLF and share this within the university and wider community

As there is very little time to discuss the full range of theories and student views on any module, WOLF was used as a communication tool to enable students to discuss (between sessions) issues they challenge, accept or reject. The WOLF topic included class notes that were enhanced by using a collection of digital video diaries from the BE-ME project resources which supported theoretical issues raised in the module and provided case studies to support student learning. Weekly activities that related to the module content were also included. It was hoped that this combination would allow students to explore ideas internally and then encourage discussion on the forum with their peers.

The initiative was assessed through ongoing monitoring of the WOLF topic and by content analysis of this information linked to responses from the students in a focus group conducted on the final session of the module in May 2003.

Semi-structured interviews would have enabled the feelings and attitudes of each respondent to be explored fully to discover their motives for using the WOLF topic to communicate. However, it was felt that a focus group would be useful in this circumstance as time was limited and this method overcame the problems of getting all the students to attend individually for interview. This was also as a result of an ethical consideration as we did not want to take up too much of the students' time.

Ethical issues were considered at all stages of the research. All students were asked at the beginning of the semester if they were willing to use WOLF as a learning tool. They were also told about the research process and their permission to engage was sought beforehand. All nine students agreed to take part. An overview of the proposed research was also posted on WOLF – this stated that the tutor would be examining usage but did not detail the nature of the project as this might have affected the findings. Students were assured that all comments would remain confidential and any identifying information would not be included. Support in using WOLF was made available early on in the module and throughout its duration.

The focus group was tape-recorded and an assistant was also present so that any non-verbal issues could be recorded. A written transcript with both of these issues was then produced. Content analysis was used for analysing both the focus group discussion and the material on the forum.

## Outcomes

The focus group was conducted with seven of the nine students on the Advanced Transcultural Health Issues module, in semester two in the academic year 2002-3. The programme was evaluated through an examination of the use of the forum by students whilst enrolled on the module and the focus group discussion. The key findings were:

### The forum findings

The group did not use the forum very much. During the module the lecturer had developed many activities and encouraged discussion by joining in himself, but this still did not seem to encourage the class to use the forum that much. However, from the information that was there it was clear that the responses/questions were not as complex as those made in class – one liners and short answers, rather than discussions and statements that would lead to further discussion. The forum had only been used a few times by only three members of the group and this occurred shortly after the training session for using the forum. Motivation waned after this.

These issues were useful in determining the prompts for the focus group.

### The focus group findings

The focus group was very useful as it uncovered a variety of reasons as to why many students did not use the forum as much as they would/could have done. Many of these points reflect the findings made by others in previous studies that have been carried out on the use of similar technology as a communication/learning tool. The main points that arose were:

- *Lack of time* – students commented that due to the demands of assessments and work on other modules they were not able to use the materials on WOLF as much as they would have liked to. They felt that the activities for the HL4030 module could be left on the ‘back burner’ and they could come back to them at a later time – a time that just didn’t come. On a related issue, having to type comments and then wait for responses proved too cumbersome and time consuming.
- *Unfamiliarity with the technology* – some of the students found that the training session delivered by the module leader early on in the module was very useful as they would not have been able to understand it without that input. However, they soon forgot how to do certain things and did not have the time to find out. They also stated that because it wasn’t being used for the other modules it was an extra thing to learn and do.
- *Not enough incentive to use the forum* – the students were very positive in their comments about the content – they found the class notes and activities very useful. However, it was generally felt that there was little point in doing the activities – considered as ‘additional work’ - if this wasn’t going to be assessed. Many of the students were working full time and studying so could not find time to do these activities.
- *Self-disclosure/projection of knowledge* – all of the students said that they were cautious of putting a question or comment on WOLF as they would worry about how it was interpreted by others. Moreover, others may get the wrong meaning from it, as there were no other ‘features of communication’ that went along with it i.e. paralanguage. Students said that in class they could play ‘devil’s advocate’ and through their tone, body language etc their colleagues would know that they were saying this to encourage debate – on the forum, these clues were missing and the comment may be taken in the wrong way. Many students said that because of the level of study, they felt that they should know issues or be able to find out themselves – other group members were not seen as a resource.
- *Sensitive nature of the topic* – students felt that information or comments were difficult to make without having to get into long discussions of why they said it and to clarify meaning. As the topic focussed on ethnic minority health issues and discussions included discrimination and people’s direct experience – it was very difficult to say this on a forum where comments would remain there. It was also felt that in a discussion in class things could be said and then, if this came out not as intended, it didn’t matter as it was not recorded or logged down and would soon be forgotten. In the forum it is a written account of their discussions and some found this uncomfortable.
- *Asynchronous nature of the tool* – when a student submitted a question on the forum they would sometimes have to wait a few days for someone to respond. As this communication exchange was asynchronous and did not occur in real time – synchronous - one respondent suggested that ‘it was easier to just go and ask them. By the time you’ve logged on, worked out how to use it and then typed your message you may just as well as phoned them. Also you had to wait for ages for someone to reply – that’s if they did.’”
- *Class notes and information* – it was felt that the main positive use of the WOLF topic was that students could access information without having to ask the module leader or

come all the way in to the university to collect a handout that they had missed. They also stated that they had used the 'chat' facility for synchronous communication when planning/discussing their group assessed presentation.

Students suggested some ways that usage could be increased – this included:

- *Having a set time each week for discussion* – this would allow for synchronous discussion and ensure that all could use the forum at the same time and prevent questions/discussions becoming 'stale'.
- *Assessed activity* – change one of the assessments to become an online assessment.
- *Wider usage in University* – this would enable students to become more used to it. It was felt that people would always be apprehensive about new technology, but if they started to use it this would soon be overcome. Students were not using WOLF for any other modules so they forgot how to use the resource very quickly.

## Benefits

The benefits of these findings are predominantly not related to the original aim of the project. They are useful in our general understanding of WOLF, how we can better use the forum and how we can perhaps increase the use of this in all modules at the university so that a blended approach can be achieved. There appeared to be a mismatch between how the students used the forum and what they said about it. They didn't use it extensively during the module, but could see that it could be a very beneficial tool if used in a way that could engage them and allow discussion in more areas than the time in class allowed. The findings suggest that the forum is not a very good place to discuss sensitive issues – unless the responses of the students could be anonymous. At the beginning of this project the lecturer wanted to explore why students did not make varied, honest and open opinions in class and wanted to explore how WOLF could be used to encourage this discussion and debate. Through this project he has discovered that they didn't do this in class – and they certainly weren't going to do it on a forum where their name was attached to the comment and where it could be interpreted wrongly. However, one method – using role-play – did prove to be successful, and encouraged students to view and explore opinions from another perspective and engaged them in the material in a deeper way.

## Evaluation

The focus group enabled an evaluation of student experience to take place. This was both positive and negative and is discussed above. Other members of staff who were interested in this piece of work were also able to comment on the initiative at various times in the year when preliminary presentations were made. One colleague who had carried out a similar piece of research provided helpful comments about how to overcome the issue of the students' names being attached and suggested the use of role play on line. This was developed and proved to overcome some of the many issues related to identifying with statements.

## Future developments

In summary, it was felt that the forum could be better used by doing the following:

- Develop interesting short activities, with the lecturer (and other teaching staff) engaging in them in order to begin the debate
- Explore the use of an online activity for summative assessment.
- Develop the use of WOLF with students early on in the module and within other modules as well.
- Arrange set times for discussion, when all students can get to a PC and engage in the discussion wherever they are – e.g. Wednesday evening
- Explore the use of anonymous message posting. [There is now a recommendation from the appropriate university group that any future VLE will have this anonymous facility.]

## Conclusion

This project outlines that communication by students on WOLF has not been as free flowing as the author presumed it would be. Students found sensitive issues difficult to discuss on the forum due to the lack of other information that accompanies face-to-face communication and the lack of anonymity in the forum. In light of these findings the author of this paper does not simply believe that it is because of this factor. He also believes that it has a lot to do with the external pressures that students face such as lack of time and opportunity to use the technology that hinders its use. The asynchronous nature of this is also a barrier to its effective use as students have to wait for responses and topics become 'stale'. Although these are obstacles, there are a number of ways they can be overcome to allow the forum to be used more effectively. Respondents stated that participation would increase if these external pressures are alleviated or minimised. Indeed, as the use of this technology increases and peoples' fear of technology wanes, WOLF will become a very valuable communication tool in the teaching of sensitive subjects.

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