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## Compulsory Or Graded Peer Forum Activity As A Factor Affecting Inclusion And Ownership Of Learning In Higher Education Distance Learning

Student Dissertation

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## MON: Compulsory Or Graded Peer Forum Activity As A Factor Affecting Inclusion And Ownership Of Learning In Higher Education Distance Learning (Richard Sharp)

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[Richard Sharp](#)

28 December 2017

### Abstract

The presentation while recognising the value of peer participation, experienced in asynchronous forums on higher education (HE) distance-learning courses, will discuss its application. Peer participation is regarded by some as an *essential* component of learning. Brown states that participation is key in a social view of learning in which understanding is socially constructed, saying “we learn [...] from our interaction with others” (Brown, 2007, 3:27). Where learning and curriculum design is framed to support this kind of social learning pedagogy, then forum participation may be set as compulsory or graded (effectively compulsory).

The paper will ask whether a compulsory approach to peer activities acknowledges diversity and supports inclusion within the student cohort. Also, whether the reduction of choice could negatively affect a student’s sense of ownership about their own learning practices, leading to isolation and exclusion.

### In support of diversity and inclusion

The UK Department for Education (DfE), in a report about inclusivity in HE stated that HE institutions must adopt inclusive practice in order to equitably support the learning experience for the whole student body (Department for Education, 2017, p. 3). The report confirms the Government’s acceptance of the social model of disability, and notes how inflexible practice, not individual characteristics, are at the root of exclusion issues (Department for Education, 2017, p. 12). Although the report focuses on disability and adjustment, there is also a clear recognition that inclusive practice and design can remove barriers for all students by “using more flexible methods of teaching, assessment and service provision to cater for different [...] learners” (Department for Education, 2017, p. 16).

### Choice, flexibility, and ownership of learning.

Anderson’s (2003) Equivalency Theory proposed that there are three types of interaction that a

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student engages in: student-student, student-teacher, and student-content interaction. These differing foci can be equally valuable in achievement of a learning outcome, dependent on the individual and situation. In relation to student-student peer interaction, Luhrs and McAnally-Salas (2016) state that asynchronous discussion forums are especially useful for students on distance courses (Luhrs & McAnally-Salas, 2016, p. 29).

When Downes (2006) said that 'students own education', he was referring to how students can now define and construct their own personal learning environments (PLEs) and make individual choices about how they act, and interact, in their own learning practice. The National Centre on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) also state that a key factor in encouraging engagement is to "optimise individual choice and autonomy" (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2017). The ability to choose gives the student a sense of ownership of their learning practice.

### Can graded or compulsory forum participation activity be restrictive and disabling?

Inclusion is a term which is often linked to disability adjustments. However, all students benefit from experiencing control over the learning practices that they choose to adopt. The presentation will suggest that practitioners consider the effect of making participatory forum activity compulsory or graded, and asks whether, for some learners, it could reduce choices, and create feelings of exclusion and disengagement?

### References

Anderson, T. (2003) 'Getting the mix right again: an updated and theoretical rationale for interaction', *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, vol. 4, no. 2 [Online]. Available at <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/149> (Accessed 20 December 2017).


Brown, J. S. (2007) 'Researching open content in education', The OpenLearn Conference October 2007 [Webcast], Milton Keynes, The Open University. Available at: <https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/page/view.php?id=972208> (Accessed 18 December 2017).

Department for Education (2017) *Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence* [Online], Gov.UK, Department for Education. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-teaching-and-learning-in-higher-education> (Accessed 18 December 2017).

Downes, S. (2006) 'The Students Own Education', *Stephen Downes*, 19 June [Blog]. Available at: <http://www.downes.ca/post/34792> (Accessed 18 December 2017).

Luhrs, C. and McAnally-Salas, L. (2016) 'Collaboration levels in asynchronous discussion forums: A social network analysis approach', *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 29-44 [Online]. Available at EBSCOhost (Accessed 19 December 2017).

National Center on Universal Design for Learning (2017) *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines* [Online]. Available at: [http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines\\_theorypractice](http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines_theorypractice) (Accessed 18 December 2017).

 OU H818 'The Networked Practitioner' Online Conference 2018

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## Poster for presentation: various media formats

[PowerPoint format](#)

[PowerPoint Slideshow format \(autoplay with audio\)](#)

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Alternative formats are available for reasons of accessibility and choice. A simple audio track in MP3 format has been created but cannot be hosted on my blog site or uploaded here - so the audio track on the PowerPoint Slideshow will act in its place.



[Richard Sharp](#)

01:19 on 28 December 2017 (Edited 00:04 on 16 February 2018)

## Project Output - Paper (draft) - Open for comments

I have my project output 'paper' in a draft format (at about 3800 words) and am sharing as a work in progress in the OU OpenStudio peer environment, as part of my preparation for the conference and EMA.

The document is shared for H818 peers on OpenStudio in my project set - this is the link, which can be copied to a browser: <https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/studio/slot.php?id=1097685&sid=456127>

Here is a [publicly accessible link](#) to the document:

Thanks. Richard.



[Richard Sharp](#)

00:04 on 25 January 2018 (Edited 00:04 on 16 February 2018)

## Conference presentation outputs

I stated, following my presentation, that I would share the materials.

- ▶ [PowerPoint with Notes](#)
- ▶ [PowerPoint with Embedded Audio](#)
- ▶ [Transcript \(Word doc\)](#)

If they open in the browser from Google drive, you can use the download button in the browser window to save the file and run it normally.



[Richard Sharp](#)

20:58 on 19 February 2018 (Edited 21:24 on 19 February 2018)

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## Embedded Content

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## Contribute

Discussion (16)

Links (0)

Academic References (6)



[Mr Jonathan G Brown](#)

2:23pm 18 January 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard,

This is a great topic, and one I'm really looking forward to at the conference. Without giving too much away before the conference, could you say a little more about what you mean by 'choice and flexibility?' Do you mean that there should be alternatives provided to forum activity for students who would prefer to work individually?



[Richard Sharp](#)

11:32pm 18 January 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jonathan.

I think that forums have a place in addition to content and access to tutors. They can be a valuable environment to discuss reflective output, observe other perspectives, receive feedback and ask questions.

I'm just saying that **inflexibility** is contrary to considerations of inclusion and diversity; even if that is the inflexible requirement for all students to learn, and act, in one particular way.

I think that it is unfair to judge a student's educational progress (and even distribute grades) based on their ability to conform to, and evidence the adoption of, a particular behavioural practice.



[Mr Jonathan G Brown](#)

9:30pm 20 January 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard,

Yes, that sounds convincing to me! I'm hoping to write about your project for the EMA, as I'm hoping to build forum use into my artefact and you've clearly spent a lot of time reflecting on forums. Do let me know if you want a second opinion on anything.



[Richard Sharp](#)

12:22am 22 January 2018 (Edited 12:23am 22 January 2018) [Permalink](#)

Hi Jonathan,

Thanks, and I will. I'm glad to be making sense to a representative of my target audience :). I'm following your project too, as one of the 2 that I'll be commenting on for my EMA.



[Claire Richardson](#)

3:16pm 6 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard,

I agree that this is an important and valuable topic and I am looking forward to your presentation. I have had a quick look through your project paper, with some interesting references such as Ferreday and Hodgson, 2008, which I intend to read.

My personal impression as a science tutor is that many students often say that they dislike and feel anxious about collaborative activities at the beginning of courses, but once they have participated in collaborative activities, typically involving forums, they often conclude that they found the collaborative activities useful. If the collaborative activities involving forums were optional, students may have chosen not to participate. However, I can see that compulsory forum activities may exclude some some students, so it is a difficult dilemma which I look forward to hearing more about.



[Richard Sharp](#)

9:16pm 6 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Claire,

I agree that forum use has potential benefits .....

But, if some students chose not to use forums, I wonder why is that a problem? Does it mean that they have a lesser grasp on the topic, or are less worthy of their final grade?

I think that a big part of the education process is undeniably certification - some even tout digital participation as a skill for the future (implying an employability skill) so there is definitely recognition of the employability outcome of a student's final grade.

As you say .... we are able to recognise that "students often [...] dislike and feel anxious about collaborative activities" and that of that group some may "[find the] activities useful", but that if given a choice many may choose not to participate.

And still .... at these critical times in the student's study, with life changing assessment results in the balance - proponents of participation choose to create this anxiety with enforcement and assessment of what is a form of learning practice. With other unintended consequences perhaps being negative effect on engagement, ownership, and inclusion.

What do you think ??



[Claire Richardson](#)

1:56pm 16 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard,

Jake Hilliard, who is a PhD student in the Institute of Educational Technology within the OU posted a link to his MRes thesis on my cloud and I think you might also find it interesting:

<http://oro.open.ac.uk/52546/>

I think I see your point about the problem of 'with life changing assessment results in the balance - proponents of participation choose to create this anxiety with enforcement and assessment of what is a form of learning practice.' But in my experience as a tutor and as a student, well designed collaborative projects are often the icing on the cake in a degree program and can really help students (including myself) consolidate their knowledge and feel part of a learning community.

I think that if students are given a choice about the way they participate (for example in real time online rooms or through forums or through wikis) there is likely to be less anxiety about getting involved. Students that really do not want to participate could also choose to email their tutor with their ideas who could act as an intermediary between the individual and their peers. As we talked about in our student forum, there are lots of ways to participate and a student who participates infrequently with high quality contributions is very valuable.

Looking forward to your presentation!

Claire



[Helen Dixon](#)

12:58pm 18 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard

Your topic is certainly very current with [a recent study](#) advocating the importance of collaborative activities and has made me rethink whether online activities should be compulsory/assessed. I think it is important to encourage learners to collaborate but, as Claire has suggested, we need to look for alternatives for students who are resistant. The draft paper is great and I am looking forward to your presentation tomorrow.

Good luck!



[Richard Sharp](#)

10:28pm 18 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Claire,

Thanks for the link, which I'll have a look at. I agree there are different ways to participate which can be valuable - the KeyNote speaker on Saturday (Sue Beckingham), on her last slide I think, said that silent positive participation by reading others' posts was valuable for

the learner.



[Richard Sharp](#)

10:33pm 18 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Helen,

Thanks - I've been surprised by how positively peers on the course have responded to the topic - with a few others also saying that it has made them think about compulsory activity.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

9:33am 20 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Richard

Well done on a great presentation! Here is a summary of the comments and questions you received following your presentation (including those you may have addressed verbally). Please respond in whatever way you choose.

Best wishes

Simon

- ▶ Our Blogs and discussion forums are part of the summative assessment.
- ▶ if they weren't [assessed] would you spend as much time on them?
- ▶ I find I lose threads and forget to follow. Reponding is awkward but I like the engagement.
- ▶ Some students may find participation difficult - enforcement doesn't take into account each individuals needs
- ▶ Futurelearn MOOCs use forums a lot, in a format which looks similar to facebook type chat.. whilst i like this i do think about the comment that students may find this difficult. How would you suggest we work with that?
- ▶ The activities that I got more involved in during my MAODE study are the most memorable. I remember the people not just the facts - it brought everything to life. Participation in the forums enabled me to bring my thoughts together and made it much easier when it came to EMA time! :)
- ▶ I would like to know more about the correlation with higher acheivement outcome - that got my attention to stay involved.
- ▶ Do you think that collaborative activities should never be compulsory even if there is a choice of format in collaborative activities? e.g. wikis rather than forums if that was preferable for the student?
- ▶ There seems to be an assumption by many that those who don't wish to participate feel that way due to a lack of confidence or ability. Do you agree with this, or can you see more reasons that can account for the choice
- ▶ I believe that online collaboration is very beneficial but appreciate that we may need to offer alternatives.
- ▶ confidence - more group work to start would engage people more quickly
- ▶ If we learn from each other, and one person doesn't participate, are they cheating



the other person?

- ▶ I've been designing some FutureLearn courses at Masters level. Discussion is key but there are different levels of discussion that can be incorporated - peer/peer, open forum, student/tutor. I think choice is definitely important
- ▶ do you think access to forums via mobile app may improve engagement



[Richard Sharp](#)

11:30am 20 February 2018 (Edited 12:15pm 20 February 2018) [Permalink](#)

Wow - lots of comments. Thanks.

I'll make a general response first, and then pick out a couple of specific ones in separate posts .....

(BTW: as I mentioned on the day I think of participatory practice on this module as slightly different to participatory activity as a pedagogical approach in others, which is more what my presentation was about)

There seem to be 2 camps among respondents - those who have experienced value in participation and really want others to have the same beneficial experience (sometimes to the point of feeling that it should be compulsory 'for their own good'), and those who find it difficult and want choice in their own learning/study practice.

I would suggest that those who have positive experience and want to 'make that happen' for others perhaps don't understand the other perspective fully. If they are teachers I wonder if they had a painfully shy student in their class would they force them to the front of class every day until they 'get over it' and become more like the others ... or go the extreme of saying that they were going to make a part of their final qualification mark about how outgoing they could force themselves to be?

The other thing I notice in the comments is whether or not you subscribe to the social learning viewpoint - one comment above is "If we learn from each other, and one person doesn't participate, are they cheating the other person?".

Well, I suppose that is the crux of the question - "If we learn from each other". Certainly that can be true, and especially where there is expert input - tutoring, mentoring, work environments, practitioners, higher level study. But is a student peer environment always sufficiently expert or knowledgeable?

And is this the ONLY way to learn ?? If you think that this is the only way to learn then I guess it's easy to want to make it compulsory and to feel that non-active participants are lazy or less deserving of a good grade or outcome.

I was pleased to see that Sue Beckingham (keynote speaker on Saturday) said that 'positive non-active participation' was valuable. She didn't seem to think that being primarily a reader and a less of a contributor was a sign of lack of effort, or a wrong inflicted upon others in the cohort.



[Richard Sharp](#)

11:35am 20 February 2018 (Edited 1:15pm 20 February 2018) [Permalink](#)

*Comment: "I would like to know more about the correlation with higher achievement outcome - that got my attention to stay involved."*

I picked out a couple of journal articles that I used in my project output 'paper' which made this claim - Canal et al. (2015) and Palmer et al. (2008):

Canal, L., Ghislandi, P., Micciolo, R. (2015) 'Pattern of accesses over time in an online asynchronous forum and academic achievements', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 619-628 [Online]. Available at EBSCOhost (Accessed 03 January 2018).

Palmer, S., Holt, D. & Bray, S. (2008) 'Does the discussion help? The impact of a formally assessed online discussion on final student results', *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 39, no. 5, pp. 847-858.



[Richard Sharp](#)

11:57am 20 February 2018 (Edited 11:57am 20 February 2018) [Permalink](#)

*Q: "Do you think that collaborative activities should never be compulsory even if there is a choice of format in collaborative activities? e.g. wikis rather than forums if that was preferable for the student?"*

I disagree with enforcement or grading of participatory activity because it's seen as a 'better' learning practice.

Maybe if the learning aim was to evidence, or reflect upon, some element of activity that includes participation - then you may need to formalise that in the curriculum. But then you couldn't you also structure the learning design to allow reflection based on observation rather than direct participation - if you chose to?

I guess that part of the problem of taking the approach of offering choice would be if you had sold the course to students as a 'participatory experience' and as a model of social learning .... then being unable to control or regulate the level of student activity would be a difficulty.



[Richard Sharp](#)

12:20pm 20 February 2018 (Edited 12:22pm 20 February 2018) [Permalink](#)

*Comment: "Participation in the forums enabled me to bring my thoughts together and made it much easier when it came to EMA time!"*

Yes, I suspect that we have some similarities in our study styles ... whether through forum activity or not, I find it beneficial to structure my study and maintain a constant effort to help me to develop my thoughts.

My sister is a crammer, who likes to do the work when it's due. That's not a style that I'd like to immitate .... but then she got her master's degree years ago and earns 3 times as much as me - so I guess it can work and we can trust the individual to know what learning approach works best for them ! ;-)



[Richard Sharp](#)

12:35pm 20 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

*Q: "There seems to be an assumption by many that those who don't wish to participate feel that way due to a lack of confidence or ability. Do you agree with this, or can you see more reasons that can account for the choice"*

I think that I've discussed the wish to choose whether or not to participate above mostly from the perspective of comfort with the practice and its social nature, and also relating to personal learning style.

But I also think that the on-going nature of participatory practice can be very time-consuming. When you consider that most distance learning students have a range of other personal and work commitments - and that they probably chose distance learning to be able to fit it around the rest of their life. Then this type of enforced regular interaction becomes difficult.

The end of this module has been difficult to keep up to - and even the most vocal participants have lessened their activity .... with outputs to produce and 3 different environments to monitor (forum, OpenSpace, Cloudworks).

## Contribute to the discussion

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