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Paper 54 – Poster

Can we offer the same learning experience to our distance learning students as we do to our taught students?

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of enabling distance learning students to have similar learning experiences to the taught group. The course is an MSc in Public Health which engages both groups in parallel, so the team consider them as one community. They have mixed experiences as public health is so diverse. However most have professional backgrounds for example GP, Dentist, Nutritionist, Public Health workers, NGO's, the group's nationality is varied with about 40% overseas students.

The programme is supported by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) using Blackboard and we engage the students with discussion boards, wikis, and blogs. The personal tutorials for the distance learning are completed either by phone or more often by Skype. Information is disseminated across the whole group by regular emails. The team work hard at enabling the distance learning students to feel part of the whole group, but it has to be recognised that it is time consuming. We have to understand why distance learning students have chosen this mode of study. For some it is because they prefer to study in their own way so are not interested in being involved, or their busy lives prevent involvement.

We have concluded that as long as we ensure a similar experience is available and our material matches the requirements of mode 3 a similar experience is available but it cannot be the same. Despite the distance learning group being small it was interesting in a recent audit that their grades were higher than that of the taught group, which has led us to believe that one of the most important parts of our material are the activities which enable concepts to be applied. Sampson (2003, p.104) said "distance learning, like any kind of learning, can serve different ends, but distance learning appears mainly to serve those who cannot or do not want to make use of classroom teaching". So we need to remember that most distance learning students select this mode because they know they can manage this type of learning. Our challenges have now been recognised and we will soon have a lecturer for the distance learning students.

Key words – Distance learning, Andragogy, Learning community.