

Using discussion forums to facilitate formative peer feedback at Level 7

Using a peer-and-tutor 'feeding-back-and-forward' approach to help students develop their research proposals

The aim

The module leader of Level 7 Research Methods module introduced a range of opportunities for students to engage in discussion around their dissertation proposals. An open and fair culture was developed so that students were not afraid of sharing and commenting on their own and other students' research ideas.

The aim was to enhance the quality of their dissertation research proposals and to develop students as mature learners and researchers.

Benefits

- Better engagement from students and a systematic approach for students to understand the preparatory process for their dissertation
- More reflective students who are better prepared to deal with academic research
- Time saving and better quality research proposals

The approach

The aim of the approach was to engage students throughout the process of developing a proposal for their dissertation. In order for their proposal to be signed off by the dissertation supervisor, the students were required to engage in a dialogue with their peers, seminar tutors and dissertation supervisor at various stages:

- **Stage 1 – Defining the Research Area.** Each student was required to identify a research area for their dissertation and post this on to the Discussion Board on Blackboard so that tutors and peers could share and discuss with them their ideas. Students used the comments put forward by their peers and tutors to refine their research ideas before the second round of discussion took place in class. The signing off of Stage 1 by the module tutor was symbolic but signified that the students had participated in the discussion with their peers in order to identify the key aspects of the research area that were worth researching.
- **Stages 2 and 3 – Learning through doing mock research proposals.** Students were divided into learning sets and each learning set was given a topic area within which they needed to identify a meaningful research question and a sequence of steps to answer that question. The groups then presented their research proposals in class. Again, all proposals and presentation slides were posted on the Discussion Board and students could share and borrow ideas from their peers. Verbal feedback was provided by tutors and peers at the presentations and detailed written feedback was then given by the tutors through the Blackboard Grade Centre.
- **Stage 4 – Developing their Research Question.** Based on the feedback from previous stages, students posted their refined research question on the Discussion Board and peers and tutors were able to see everyone's ideas. This created an open and fair culture among the cohort. Once the discussion took place in the seminar, tutors would sign off this work so that students could progress on to the next stage which was to request a dissertation supervisor.
- **Stage 5 – Working with dissertation supervisor at an earlier stage.** Using the formative and summative feedback obtained from various stages, students submitted a 'research portfolio workbook' which contained all the work they did at different research stages and a reflective summary of their journey. Dissertation supervisors started to get involved in students' research journeys from Research Methods and they contributed towards students' research workbook. Students gradually transferred from a group to individual learning environment.

“The sequence of delivering of the module teaching, the step by step approach is educating and involving.”

- *Masters Student (Level 7)*

The outcome

Using technology to support both formative and summative feedback on this module provided the following outcomes:

- Good student and supervisor engagement
- The quality of peer feedback was good. The students assumed the role of a critical friend to help each other to develop
- The students used the feedback received from the peers and tutors to develop their own research proposal
- Better understanding of the research process, especially in developing a workable research question and the steps needed to answer that specific question

Student comments on the most positive impact on their learning experience in this module :

- *“Seminar sessions and feedback from other colleagues.”*
- *“Presentations and peer learning process. Very interactive. Challenge each other to capitalise on our strengths and overcome our weaknesses.”*
- *“The fact that tasks are divided in small parts to help us - gives better understanding.”*

Profile

Tutor names:

Arun Sukumar and Dora Chan

Faculty:

Sheffield Business School

Size of cohort:

100+ students

Technologies used:

Blackboard, Microsoft Word, Discussion Boards

If you would like your assessment practice captured and shared in a similar case study, please email ! Assessment Journey Programme

Future Development

The tutor plans to introduce:

- Capturing video recordings of the presentations
- Using Crocodoc in Blackboard for inline-marking of the submitted documents

Recommendations

The tutor suggests that anyone interested in developing this approach:

- Be aware of the time taken to monitor students' Blackboard activities
- Be prepared to engage with the online group discussions
- Be prepared to iterate the importance of idea sharing