

Activities to improve the engagement of international students in online teaching

Simon R Collinson and Catherine Halliwell



The Open University

Feedback from interviewing international students about online distance learning



- Often found wording of questions was overly complicated
- Students felt a duty to contribute to online forums
- Reluctance to talk online
- Time difference can be an issue
- Rate of study and level of staff support is higher in UK
- UK courses have more applied and up to date content

This informed our activities below for students studying the level 3 course Metals and Life in 2013.

International Context Based Learning online tutorial activity

1. Provided Powerpoint slides for tutors and pre-tutorial tasks for students
2. Extracts from *Is the Western diet adequate in copper?*, *J Trace Elem Med Biol*, 2011, 25, 204
3. Students asked to find (i) RDAs for transition metals in home country and (ii) typical values in foods

Reflections on the online tutorial group activity

- Tutors used slides or merged with their own
- Tutors more confident as discussing same material as others
- Liked the level of interactivity included & contextualising the material
- About 14-17% of students per group studied material in advance
- Student feedback via e-mail was limited but positive
- Salt in diet was mentioned – [this inspired the next activity](#)

Nutrition Facts		
Serving Size: About (20g)		
Servings Per Container: 16		
	Amount Per Serving	% Daily Value*
Total Calories	60	
Calories From Fat	15	
Total Fat	2 g	3%
Saturated Fat	1 g	4%
Trans Fat	0 g	
Cholesterol	0 mg	0%
Sodium	45 mg	2%
Total Carbohydrates	15 g	5%
Dietary Fiber	4 g	17%
Sugars	4 g	
Sugar Alcohols (Polyols)	3 g	
Protein	2 g	
Vitamin A		0%
Vitamin C		0%
Calcium		2%
Iron		2%

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

International CBL forum activity on salt in diet

1. Key skills and scientific knowledge
2. *Salt in bread in Europe: potential benefit of reduction*, *Nutr Rev*, 2012, 70, 666
3. Skim read paper, taking notes, then assess abstract, conclusion & full paper
4. Asked to critically evaluate the paper
5. Contrast with weaker paper *Influence of exogenous iron, calcium, protein & common salt on the bioaccessibility of zinc from cereals*, *J Trace Elem Med Biol*, 2009, 23, 75
6. Calculated salt from bread in their own diet and values from data for another country
7. Study and discuss Na⁺ in ion channels on RCSB protein databank



Reflections on the forum activity

- Only 8% of students posted as it was optional and 44% of students lurked on forum
- 33 students posts with some posts explored the topic further citing other work
- Students valued skim reading and felt topic was relevant to them and the course
- No-one critically evaluated the paper, which has been shown as a generic weakness of students

Quote from a student, 'Being able to apply one's understanding of the principles to real-life problems is fundamental to maintaining the motivation for the study. I think that for a distance learner who is relieved of the pressure to level with their peers, it is important that there be an alternative source of inspiration. Contextualising the theory certainly works for me.'

We are keen to hear about best practise from other academics teaching international students.

Department of Life, Health & Chemical Sciences,
Walton Hall,
The Open University
simon.collinson@open.ac.uk

c.halliwell@open.ac.uk

