

Creating an effective learning community in a large-class service teaching physiology course

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Ideally students should enjoy a community of practice that includes students, academics and industry representatives, and that facilitates learning based on inquiry, discovery and practice. In large-class service teaching courses this is seldom feasible. However, we believe that by creating effective learning communities in these courses, we are able to engender creative interest from students and enhance their learning experiences. In such learning communities students and teaching staff all engage with each other to acquire knowledge and share understanding, counteracting the trend towards isolation students feel in such large cohorts and their disillusionment with the field of study and its relevance to their chosen profession. In this study we set out to facilitate the creation of an effective learning community in a 3rd year Physiology course for Pharmacy students by (1) focusing on clear learning objectives, (2) delivering interactive lectures that concentrate on major physiological concepts, (3) providing discovery based practicals, (4) convening an on-line discussion board, (4) providing practice questions to reassure students about the validity of the learning objectives and to stimulate in-depth, out-of-class learning activities, and by (5) convening a final voluntary tutorial before the end-of-the semester exam for students in need of further nurturing. We received very positive student feedback and student performance in the end-of-the semester assessment was markedly increased compared to the previous year, from an average of 66% in 2003 to an average of 89% in 2004.