

Engaging and supporting first year distance education students through the use of an online virtual classroom

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Abstract

The transition to University study can be difficult for all first year students and this is especially true for students studying via Distance Education (DE). DE students often have little to no “real-time” contact with academic staff members and thus often feel extremely isolated. The Wimba classroom offers a live, virtual classroom with features that include: audio, text chat, video, whiteboard and presentation facilities, application sharing, real-time polling and break-out tutorial rooms. Online tutorials in the Wimba virtual classroom were piloted in a first year Introductory Medical Science subject in 2011 and a formal evaluation of the use of this new teaching tool was conducted. Overall, student feedback indicated that the “real-time” online tutorials were highly beneficial as they allowed greater interaction with academic staff members. Students also reported feeling better supported and less isolated after participation in these sessions.