

Integration of online Journal Clubs as a venue for learning and assessment

By Jette Jörgensen Mebrouk, RN, PhD
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Akureyri

Teaching in higher education has, with technological advancement, been provided with new and interesting opportunities. In the meantime, the very same technologies challenge teaching and the academic community, where dialogues and discussion are factors in students' development, as well as teachers' professional satisfaction.

While some students enrolled in programs at the University of Akureyri live in Akureyri, many students live far away: Some reside in towns around Iceland, while others live abroad. Students have the choice of attending classes on campus or via Zoom linked to the screen in the classroom. For those students, who for various reasons cannot attend via any of those ways, they will be able to watch the recordings of the lectures. While this offers flexibility and enables people from a variety of settings to pursue a degree within higher education, it also challenges class participation. Asynchronous discussions quickly become irrelevant, and not being able to meet face to face creates more than a physical distance between students and teachers. Students' cameras are often turned off during class, where they easily have a passive role, or totally disappear from the 'learning community'.

It is, in my opinion, educators' responsibility to find ways to motivate students and overcome these challenges. In this presentation I will share my experiences as a newly hired international educator, taking over a course in Fundamentals of Qualitative Research Methodologies for second year students. Like in many university courses, the number of students was above 100, and they were from three different educational programs.

I have previously worked with Journal Clubs as a learning venue: I first came across the concept of Journal Clubs in my clinical practice as a staff nurse, where multidisciplinary Journal Clubs were an integrated part of clinical practice, discussing articles about care and treatment of the patient category of the ward. Later I used Journal Clubs as a teaching approach for nurses enrolled in post-graduate programs.

When taking over the course of Fundamentals of Qualitative Research Methodologies, I was challenged as to how to ensure that the students would reach the learning outcomes, considering the challenges mentioned above. I very much wanted to engage all students in a dialogue and leave no-one behind. I decided to introduce the concept of Journal Clubs to the students on this program, fully aware that I might face challenges. Therefore, I started by sending a pre-course self-assessment and survey out to the students, and I used their responses to tailor the Journal Clubs.

There was mixed feedback regarding my plans to use Journal Clubs as a way of assessment with points towards final grades. While some students would prefer written assignments on an individual basis, there were also several students who found it interesting to try out a Journal Club, despite not knowing what a Journal Club was. The pre-course survey also revealed that 58% of the students did not feel confident asking or answering questions in a big group over Zoom. However, only 15% of the students reported that they would not feel confident asking or answering questions in a small group. I therefore designed the Journal Clubs, with 4-6 students

in each, allowing for students to be in groups with other students from the same program. This was done with the intention of increasing the likelihood of them getting to know each other, and having a common professional focus area, which would likely be a motivational factor, and important to the learning process.

I conducted 24 Journal Clubs of which two were scheduled as catch-up opportunities for students who, for one or another reason, could not attend in the week when the Journal Clubs were scheduled. The Journal Clubs, which took place over a closed Zoom room, were recorded for documentation in case I needed to go back and review sequences in relation to allocating points in the students' rubrics.

It was a new way for the students to be assessed, but coming from the Danish education system, where we work a lot with oral examination, it was not new to me. I was pleasantly surprised how well the sessions went, and the quality of dialogue and discussion involving critical appraisal of the qualitative research articles that I had chosen for the purpose.

Although I was satisfied with the outcome, it was also important to identify the students' experiences, and therefore they were invited to give feedback in an anonymous evaluation survey. Generally, the students were satisfied with the initiative, and most students found that they learned something new, and that their contributions to the discussion in the Journal Club were valued.

There were also suggestions as to how the Journal Club concept could be improved, such as suggestions to give "longer time on zoom to talk about answers and discussion" and "provide further description, for example whether the group is supposed to collaborate [before and during] the journal club meeting" as well as it was seen to be "beneficial to add an extra journal club meeting to the current schedule. The additional meeting would allow for further collaboration among peers, resulting in a deeper understanding of the subject matter."

I have also reflected upon the experience and have identified aspects that I would like to change or enhance for the next course. Such as a visual demonstration of how a Journal Club could take place. One of the challenges this approach faces is related to the allocation of points: While the Journal Club is a joint learning venture, it may enhance some student's participation, while hindering or challenging other students when they know that points are given. Although I tried to create a relaxed atmosphere, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of asymmetric relations that exist between students and teachers. I am looking forward to challenging the approach, and I see plenty of good opportunities for using Journal Clubs in teaching in higher education.