

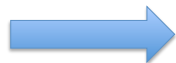
# Cost-benefit analysis of an asynchronous online forum in supporting a large L2 class

Joseph V. Gray  
Kevin O'Dell

School of Life Science  
CMVLS



## Plan



- Introduction to course and forum
- Use of the forum by and to students
- Input by staff. *Is it worth the effort?*
- KEY to a good (or bad) forum. *A simple answer*
- Moodle vs. Facebook. *Does it matter?*

## L2 Essential Genetics 2009-



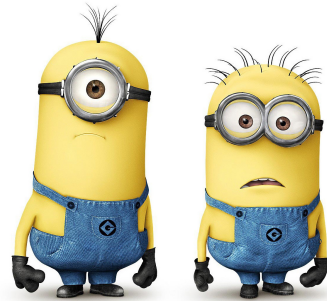
22 Lectures

2 Labs

**(8 drop-in Tutorials)**

12 Weeks: Oct-Dec

Mostly taught by 2 staff  
members



## Challenge to provide support



Student Numbers: range 329-420

2012-2013: **329**



### Diverse Class:

<¼ will do Biomolecular degree

>¾ will do diverse range of Other Biology degrees

### Subject seen as forbidding:

Many are afraid of Genetics - perceived as difficult

Course emphasizes understanding over rote learning

Course involves:            problem solving  
   (limited) independent literature research/essay writing

## L2 Essential Genetics Forum



### Course Management, Feedforward and Feedback:

We fell into using the **Moodle online forum (Asynchronous)**:

- EASY
  - We are technophobic & techno-illiterate
  - Reactive and unplanned: Post news and respond to queries/ comments
- Efficient:
  - A two-way Dialogue between us and ALL the students
  - We have better things to do (= lazy)



## L2 Essential Genetics Forum



### Establishing the Moodle forum:

*We REFUSE to answer e-mails on any generic/scientific topics  
Importance of the “forum” is declared in first lectures  
Importance of the “forum” established by our posting and replying  
(guarantee SOME response within ONE working day)*

## L2 Essential Genetics Forum



“The” Moodle FORUM: made up of two forums

*Staff and students can post on both*

- Staff forum (“messages from Kevin and Joe”)
  - We post any course management news
  - We start a few relevant threads e.g., “post questions on take home test here”



- Student forum (THE more active):
  - Students start ALL/most threads
  - Staff replies are BRIEF and REACTIVE: to stimulate thought and debate - NOT to give answers (until thread runs out of steam)

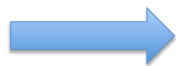


*The “forum” is NOT anonymous*

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## Student activity



### Total "views" by students (2012-2013)

Student forum: 20,642 (63 views/student)  
Staff forum: 8,350 (25 views/student)

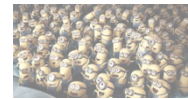
>95% of students active on forum

### Total POSTINGS by students (2012-2013)

Student forum: 331  
98 threads

Staff forum: 50  
51 threads

381 posts in total (by 115 [35%] of students)



## Student opinion:



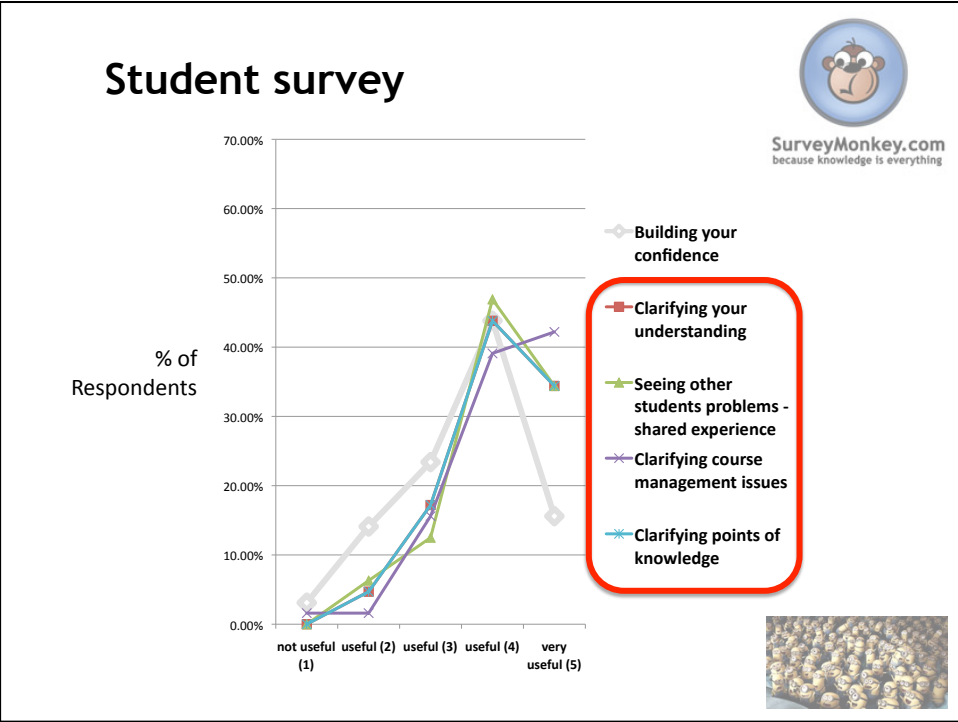
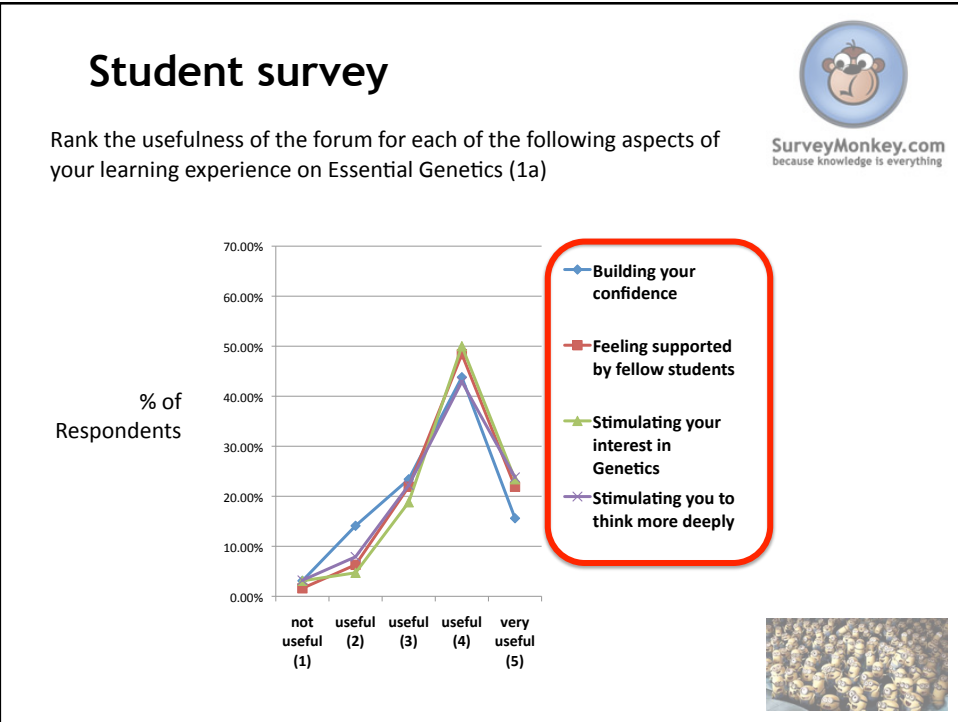
Surveyed 2012/13 class March 2013:  
64 replies to an online survey (SurveyMonkey):

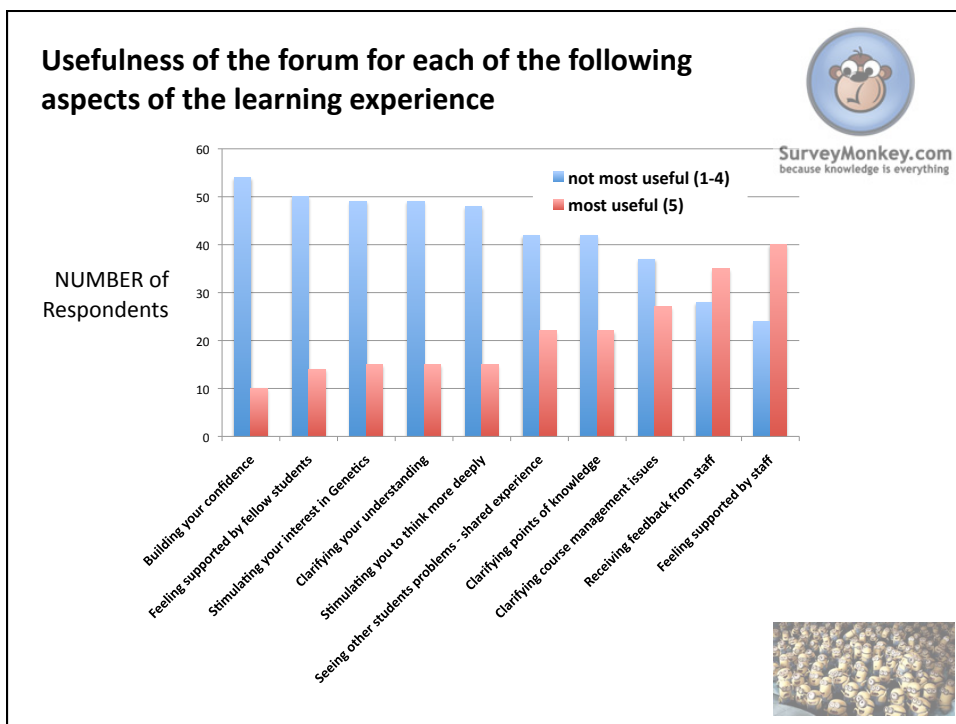
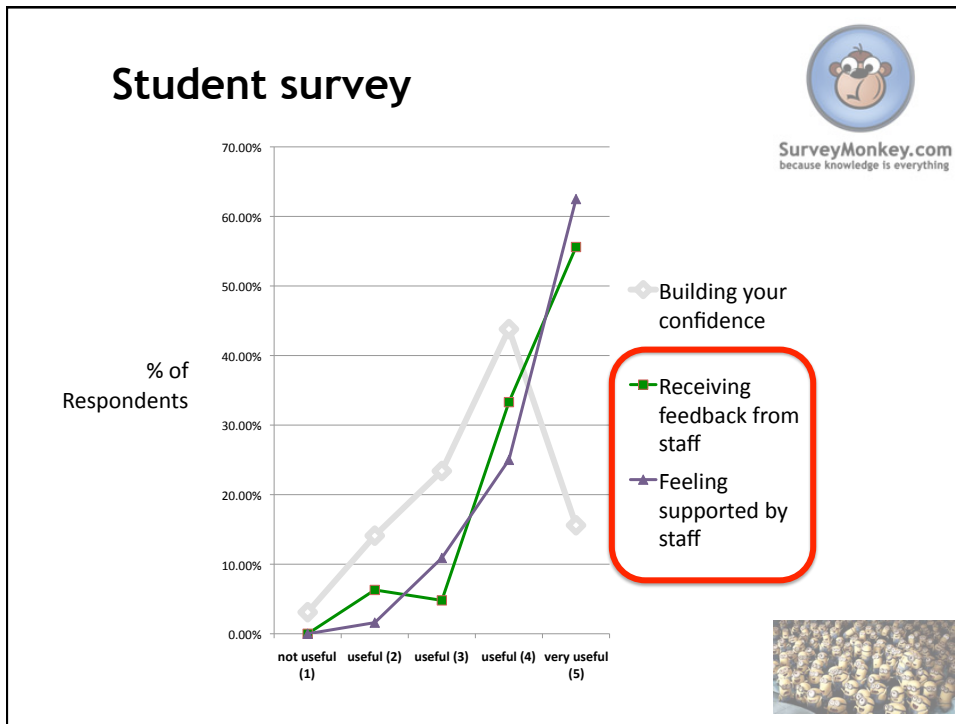
- Usefulness of the forum
- KEY to a good (or bad) forum?
- Moodle vs. Facebook



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because knowledge is everything







## Some student comments on Forum



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### Really good for important announcements

Genetics is not my chosen degree, however after studying this module I am genuinely considering switches courses. Favourite module of the first semester, excellent feedback from staff, right amount of coursework balanced with lecture material.

any questions were answered very quickly and if a student answered then a member of staff would still comment also very very useful.

I liked how Joe put up "light relief"

This was the only L2 course in which I believe that the forum was exceptionally useful, for other courses it was barely used

Feedback was given very quickly by staff and it was greatly appreciated. Though I did not post I ensured to continually check the forum to help my knowledge of the course and I was very glad to see a high level of participation from staff.

I found this forum to be the best out of all my classes both this year and last. Both tutors would some times answer adding to each other meaning lots of useful information. I also liked the fact they would occasionally post relevant news etc.

The lecturers were a lot more active in the forum than the lecturers for other subjects, and I felt that encouraging other students to answer questions helped my understanding a lot by making me think things through more.

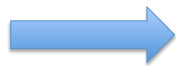


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## Staff activity



Staff **postings** (JVG and KOD):

Staff forum **85** (students = 50)

Student forum **331** (students = 381)

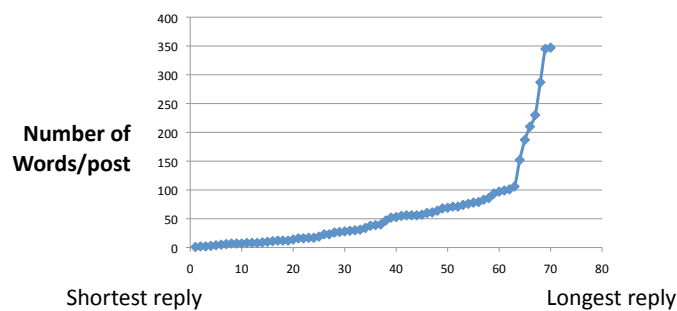
Staff **viewings** (JVG and KOD): to read 847 postings in total over 12 weeks = 14 posts per working day.

**Less work than checking e-mails**

**Tried to limit activity to once per day**



## Staff Postings: Size



Rank order of replied by size  
(70 randomly selected posts by KOD)

**60.4 WORD AVERAGE REPLY**



## Staff postings: range



OK

Actually this links in with something Joe said in one of the other threads.

As I'm sure you realise there is a lot more information out there than we can possibly squeeze into a 22-lecture L2 course. So we have to pick and choose stories, and pitch them in a way that you'll (hopefully!) understand.

This is a good example of that, in that I gave you one explanation of why protamine-1 is the fastest evolving gene since the human/chimp split, but there are other possible explanations.

(note that nothing beyond this point will be directly asked in the exam, but you might find it interesting!).

Nevertheless, any explanation for why there are so many 'sex genes' among the fastest changing genes must involve rapid changes in competition either between males (sperm competition theory) or between males and females (sexual conflict theory). In other words within the human population there is variation at genes (different alleles) that are only advantageous for a subset of the population (for example one sex) but not the other (the opposite sex).

It can get horribly complicated, for example at these kind of genes the most common allele can sometimes find itself at a selective disadvantage only once it's become common. And so on.....

Some psychologists use this to explain trends in fashion. A certain style or look may well confer some advantage to the person (male or female) wearing that style. The rest of the population then copy that style to gain that same level of attractiveness. However, once the majority look the same it's no longer cool and the next trend will arise. A similar effect occurs at a gene level (think of clothes as genes and fashion as alleles), but alleles obviously change by chance (mutation) rather than design(ers). Of course most mutations confer a disadvantage just like most new fashion trends! So in a sense successful changes in fashion are just as much due to chance as mutations in an allele.

You might want to use this information to your advantage when you're out on the town tonight.



## Staff input:



**Estimate that staff spent ~10-15 hours TOTAL on the forum over 12 weeks**

Less time than:

- Reading and answering class e-mails we would otherwise have received
- Spent running a set of DROP-IN tutorials (1 per week) with ~5 of the 329 students in attendance any given week.

**CONCLUSION: EXTREMELY TIME EFFICIENT**

And can be **FUN**

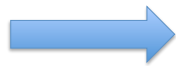
And can be very informative – **feedback to staff**



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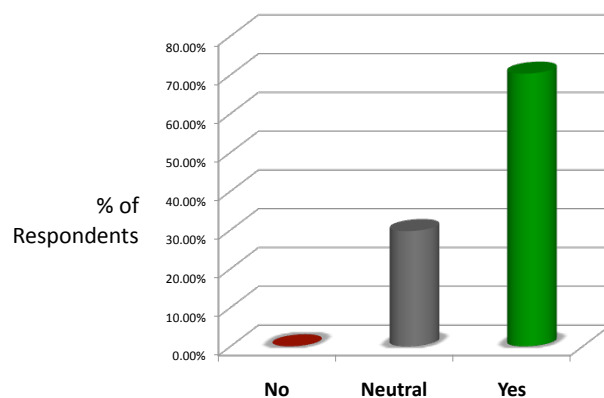
• KEY to a good (or bad) forum. ***A simple answer***


- Moodle vs. Facebook. *Does it matter?*

Would students like to see their other courses make BETTER USE of the Moodle Forum?



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 University of Glasgow

## What is holding Forum use back?????



iDon't get it!

Staff on other courses did not encourage as much use of the Moodle forum.

N/A

They were not as helpful as the genetics one

No used enough by staff

Sometimes staff don't reply for a while, genetics really stood out, staff replied almost immediately with very helpful replies.

I have noticed other courses have not always kept upto date on the forum compared to Essential Genetics. Also not all lecture slides were on Moodle for some lectures, and although we should go to all the lectures I feel that the same information should go on Moodle for all courses so it is clear for all students what information will be available to them after lecture times.

They weren't used by the staff.

The other Moodle forums are not as interactive as the Essential Genetics one was.


Some courses didn't use a moodle forum at all so the only way to ask questions was via email. Responding through the forum is often more efficient as other students with similar problems can also join it and read the content. In my opinion the use of the moodle forum in the Genetics course has probably been the best out of all the other courses I have signed up to so far. Lots of good questions were asked and informatively answered by either students or Kevin/Joe

No one posts anything!


Don't always reply back to questions asked about the course content or management There is not as much discussion about particular parts that students are struggling with

There wasn't one for some courses

Lack of information regarding courses/ Lack of staff presence or activity.



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Answer:

**STAFF NOT USING THE FORUM  
ENOUGH OR AT ALL  
(or well)**

get it!



**Students appreciate the  
(relative) appearance of effort**

**It is understandable if many lecturers feel they do not  
have the time to do this to the extent of the genetics course  
- shouldn't be pressured into it if they can't manage it.**

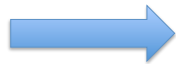
QUOTE: a student



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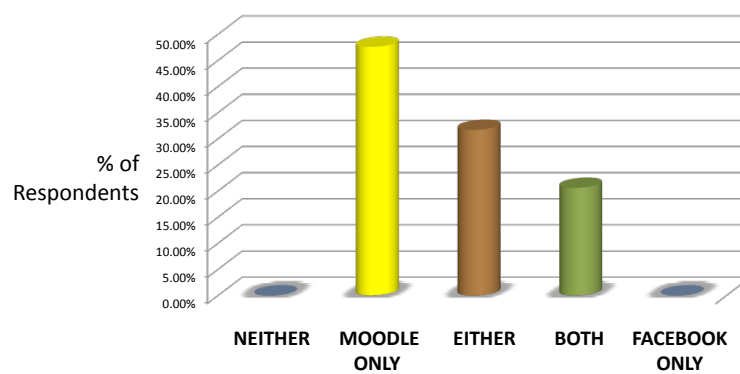



- Moodle vs. Facebook. *Does it matter?*

## versus what should we use in future?



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Not all people would feel comfortable having course staff/ other students on facebook 

I feel like it's more professional for staff to use Moodle, and when students want to discuss things between themselves they can use Facebook :)

It will be more likely that everyone taking the course will get important messages/answers.

The moodle site was very helpful to read all the students queries and have the lecturers answer them all. But the Facebook page is good as you are able to talk freely without lecturers seeing (not always bad comments) and I think it should stay that way

Students know by putting questions on moodle they are for staff facebook is used as a general place to discuss things not the actual course content.

Facebook is more for students to help each other.



Not everyone has Facebook but all students have a Moodle account. Using both would mean some students would miss out on some advice!


I am opposed to the general idea of Facebook.

I think that students are a lot more willing and less "shy" to ask questions and answer them on the FB page as it is all students and in a less formal context. If students still aren't sure about something after doing their own research and/or asking on the FB page then a question can be posted on moodle

Either that or only Moodle. There may be others like myself grappling with deleting their Facebook.


I'd rather keep my facebook/social life seperate from staff as much as possible. Facebook discussions can be more honest and casual without fear of repercussions. There's more opinionated posts. While the staff on moodle can handle more technical questions.



**The staff were very active and approachable in their willingness to help with queries on the moodle site and as result I found there was less discussion about this course on the Facebook page compared to other courses that aren't as interactive**

QUOTE: another student



## Conclusion:



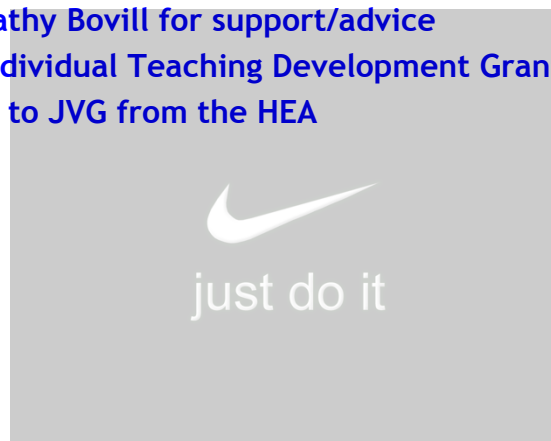
ONLINE FORUM IS EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT for large classes... but only if we



## Acknowledgements



- \* Kevin for (more) Forum activity
- \* the 64 students who responded to the survey
- \* Cathy Bovill for support/advice
- \* Individual Teaching Development Grant to JVG from the HEA





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