A Case Study of Online Collaborative Work in a Large First Year Psychology Class

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OVERVIEW

Basic Psychology at Strathclyde University is currently the largest psychology class in the UK. The student roll has in some years totalled 610 students and has never fallen below 520 students in the last 12 years.

Although successful in terms of student enthusiasm and engagement with the lecture course, one persistent problem with the class was that more material was presented in lectures than was referred to by the majority of students in their examination answers. This imbalance was, of course, the reverse of what should be the case when students take responsibility for their learning. Another difficulty was that no system of early assessment - summative or formative - was available to Basic Psychology students. Setting conventional essays was not practicable given the size of the class with the result that students got no feedback on their performance in each semester except for multiple choice class tests held in December and April. This paper presents details of an initiative designed to provide early and regular formative assessment opportunities to this large class. An example of the scheme working is presented and students' ratings of the scheme are reported and discussed.

Keywords
Online collaborative learning; generic feedback; VLE.

THE INITIATIVE

With the development of the VLE, particularly the introduction of WebCT, it became possible to explore the usefulness of introducing online formative assessment, based on peer review and non-graded assessment of each other's work, by First Year Psychology students at Strathclyde University. With the support of a Research Assistant, funded by the REAP project, an online collaborative learning scheme was piloted in May 2006 A sample of Basic Psychology student volunteers was assigned to six-person, WebCT-based online discussion group. Each group was given three assignments, based on current lecture material, each to be completed over the course of a week. Generally, the results were encouraging. Feedback suggested that students found this a motivating and effective way to learn.

Based on this work, it was proposed, in a departmental discussion document, radically to revise the Basic Class teaching programme. The three principal aims of the new programme were: a) to improve students' engagement with the subject by obliging them to begin their reading in Week 1 of the semester; b) to give them early and continuing peer support and feedback in a way practicable in such a large class, and c) to enhance students' sense of belonging to the department and the university.

Lectures would continue in their usual form on Mondays. However, the development of subjects which would normally be the purpose of each Friday lecture under the previous system would be presented as an online task for students to undertake themselves, working in online groups of 6 or 7 students over the course of a week, with the deadline for project completion being noon on the following Monday. The work of these groups would visible only to each group and the course lecturers. Staff time saved would be redeployed in monitoring students' online work. Feedback, based on the best group work each week, would be posted online after completion of each project. The purpose of using students' group work as feedback, rather than 'model' answers prepared by staff with years of training and experience, would be to show students what their peers were capable of. As a result, they should be more likely to accept that they too should be capable of producing a similar standard of work.

Twelve such projects would be set over the course of the year, with guided reading weeks interspersed so that students did not feel overly burdened by the programme. Subject headings with notes and directions to guide reading for each exercise and compilation of responses would be posted online after each Monday lecture. In this way the basis for each online discussion would be provided by preceding lectures. Friday lectures would be abolished. The overall design of the course is six blocks of three weeks each, dealing with different areas within psychology. In each three week block a scaffolding approach would be used for the tasks, with the early exercises in each lecture block asking students to define and illustrate key terms relevant to the current subject matter, and later assignments requiring students to compile essays collaboratively.

Specifically, in Week 1 of each lecture block, a light 'introductory' written task, typically requiring 7 short answers, would be set, immediately after the lecture on which it was based, with the workload distributed amongst group members. In Week 2 students would be set a reading task giving them a chance to prepare for the more demanding task to be set in Week 3: This 'in-depth' task, typically requiring 7 longer answers which would then be combined by the students themselves into a single coherent essay, with the workload again distributed amongst group members. Students would have one week in which to complete each task, with the deadline set at noon on the day of the next lecture (lectures are from 2-3pm).

The 'in-depth' task would require students to read material which substantially develops the topic of the preceding lecture but which was not discussed in the lecture according to the following recommendations
- All should read the textbook passage (and perhaps additional material)
- All should satisfy themselves they could answer all the short answers and so be able give each other feedback on contributions.
- All should agree on the division of labour
- All should produce written answers to their agreed part of the task
- By agreement, one student should act as 'postperson', assembling and revising a combined essay which the others should comment on.
- All are supposed to show active participation by posts.

Group responses would be monitored and one or two each week would be selected as model answers and posted on Basic Psychology WebCT as generic feedback for the entire class.

Finally, and in addition to the online scheme, a course-wide single VLE discussion forum would be available to the whole class for any purpose, within the limits of propriety, for which they chose to use it. This would be monitored by the Class Leader. This (and also the lectures) would provide an arena in which the whole class could have access to a larger learning community than could be provided by the online collaborative learning groups.

This programme was implemented in Week I 2006/2007. At the start of the year, students were given general instructions to negotiate with each other and to nominate one group member to collate individual contributions and post the result as their final group answer.

The task specifications were subdivided in the light of problems perceived in the pilot project, and the structuring of tasks was monitored and adjusted during the course by the class lecturer. The lecturer's perception here was that it was not necessary specifically to subdivide the task into (say) introduction, main section, and conclusion. Rather, tasks were structured on the basis of the key technical concepts within a topic. Tasks were only devised after delivery of the corresponding lecture in order to ensure they 'dovetailed' with the lecture material and developed it, rather than overlapping with it.

The twelve assignments have now been run, and approximately 22,000 Online Project messages have been posted by students to their discussion groups, of which there were 82 in total. As the class reduced in size from the initial roll of 580, some students were moved at their own request into other groups (which themselves had lost members). This addressed both loss of numbers, lack of participation, and any other problems in some groups. The VLE records made it easy to identify which students had simply not logged on in any given period, and follow up such absenteeism. In any cases where these things were not enough to resolve problems, the VLE records allow a review of all the content contributed by each individual.

Across the board the quality of student responses to the assessment exercises has been outstanding in many cases, with some content frequently surpassing the level expected of second year students and even, in some cases of fourth year students. This level of engagement exceeded expectations which had been based on the pilot work in May 2006. Most students have reacted positively to the exercise. Many are enthusiastic but even among those who complain about the workload, many allow that the programme has obliged them to read about psychology much earlier and in much more detail than they would have done otherwise.

With regard to the class VLE forum, students posted questions and comments of many kinds, and those not answered by other students would be fielded by the lecturer. Occasionally an intellectual discussion on a psychology topic not in the curriculum would be launched and sustained by the students themselves or the lecturer. Sometimes a "meta-level" discussion of the nature of this course and the way it was run would be held; or students' feedback on a course decision would be requested.

One example of the online collaborative learning group work - the task set and one group's response, - is given below.

THE TASK

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Online Project   9

Deadline – noon on Monday Feb 12th.

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References: both articles posted on the WebCT main page (click on Hans Eysenck's picture). Also Passer and Smith (Chapter 12) - section on Psychosexual Development and section 'Evaluating the Psychodynamic Approach'.

Then, also in Chapter 12, the section beginning 'Biological Foundations of Personality' at least as far as Behavioural and Cognitive Theories. Also articles by Freud available from 'Online Articles'. Gleitman too has useful things to say.

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The Project

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Online Project 9 is to work, <u>as a group</u>, to produce an 800 word essay (more if you like) which MOST FULLY IN YOUR COLLECTIVE VIEW answers the following exam-style question (a similar question may well appear in the May exam – who knows?):

<div align="center">

Assess the strengths and weaknesses of Freud's and Eysenck's theories of personality. Are the theories incompatible?

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Remember that everybody should do the whole essay in order to be able to comment on each other's work. So it doesn't matter whether there are five or 7 of you in any group. How you divide up the task of posting and editing the elements of the essay is up to you to negotiate with each other. But -

- one suggestion is that half of you post, say, 250 words summarising Freud while the other half summarise Eysenck in 250 words. Then, as a group, debate and post your thoughts on the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, before reaching and posting a conclusion.

Some issues which you <u>might</u> consider:

Does one theory contradict the other so that both cannot be correct?

Or – do they address different aspects of personality?

Can the theories be integrated?

The heritability of traits

The unconscious

Interactions between traits and experience?

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GROUP 58 RESPONSE

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   **Date: 06 February 2007**

Subject: Freud strengths - anything ive to fix giv me a shout :)
    Author: AR

Despite his many critics, it cannot be forgotten that it was Freud who first founded the theory of psychoanalysis. He believed that "unconscious processes can affect behaviour." (Passer and Smith, Page 153) Although many disagree with Freud's theories it cannot be denied that his ideas have brought about many changes to the field of psychology. His work introduced and encouraged a deeper examining of the study and treatment of psychological disorders, attempts to try and understand the seriousness of such a disorder were only brought about once Freud had introduced the theory. Furthermore, although his ideas were not fully taken on board, they encouraged further research on issues such as dreams and aggression. His work was a stepping stone for further analysis and new psychological discoveries.

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   **Date: 07 February 2007**

Subject: Strenghts and Weaknesses of Eysnecks Theory   Author: PR

Finding this stuff really difficult to get my head around but I have given it a go anyway. If anyway can think of ways to improve this then give me a shout and I will to my best to change it.There are a great number of strengths and weaknesses related to Hans J.Eysenck's theory of personality. Firstly the fact that the type of personality that people have whether that be an introverted or extroverted personality can be tested across a wide range of personality traits and so produce quite accurate and reliable results about what type of personality a person actually possesses. For example you can measure whether a person is an introvert or extrovert by how sociable they are and any number of other factors can also be taken into account when making such decisions about a person's personality. Furthermore yet another strength of Eysenck's theory is experimental research on fraternal and identical twins which showed that identical twins are more likely to have similar personality traits backed up his idea that in some way peoples personality can in some way be biologically predisposed. Another strength of Eysnecks theory is that it has at least in someway been tested as the twins example highlights in comparison to Freuds theory which was based purely on theory and was heavily criticised for not being measurable.However despite some of the obvious strengths of Eysnecks theory there are also some very apparent weaknesses in the theory. One such weakness that lies within the theory is the fact that different people may react differently to different situations e.g someone may react to stress by sweating excessively whereas another person may suffer from severe headaches. This is known as individual and stimulus response specifity. Also the fact that people may have some of the personality traits that could see them classed as being an introvert or extrovert there may be broad variations in people's personalities and therefore to classify them as one or the other may be too broad a generalisation to make. Finally recent research has suggested that it may be too simple to relate levels of brain activation levels to levels of cortical

arousal and that it may be specific brain structures that play a pivotal role in such a process.

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 09 February 2007

Subject: My part   Author: SM

Sorry its taken so long, guys. Its been difficult to fit it all in with 2 games a day!! So i've put together a SMALL part about Freud and his stuff. Hope its useful!!The psychodynamic approach of the study of personality by Sigmund Freud is seen as controversial to many modern-day psychologists. His way of carrying out his experiments - more, observations - were sometimes thought of as unreliable. Freud managed to break away from traditional "experiments" to reach valuable conclusions about the process of evolution of a human's personality. This could be seen as a weakness to others that don't believe in his methods, but a strength to Freud, himself, as it sets him apart. Some critics are sceptic that Freud's theories about childhood sexuality and the idea of psychosexual stages are believable, despite the fact that there is clear evidence that childhood experiences can influence greatly the way, and how, a child would mature.Hope its ok....!!S x

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 09 February 2007

Subject: Compatibility between the two   Author: AS

It is obvious that both Freud's theory of the three levels of personality and Eysenck's Five Factor Model will have some similarities on the basis that both investigate the workings of the mind and how different peoples personality causes them to react and respond to different stimuli (situations) in a large variety of ways. It is only until recent years however that similarities between the two theories have come to light. It has been established that the five-factor model is quite compatible with other popular psychological theories as well, not just those involved with factor analysis. Its been popular for some psychologists to link the five-factor model and Freud's theories of psychoanalyses. For example, recent experiments have made evident links between Freud's concept of the ego and the five variables in Eysenck's model. A report of a recent experiment conducted by Huey and Weiss (1997) focuses on ego resiliency and control in adolescent boys, "Ego resiliency seems to reflect, in part, the well adjusted pole of each FFM(five-factor model) dimension, whereas Ego under control...reflects high extroversion, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness."The parallels between elements of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis (known for its application, but also for its lack of consideration for surrounding environments) and elements of the Freud's FFM, helps to show the compatibility of the Five-factor Model with not only Freud's but multiple theories.Was a bit difficult to relate this one guys....sorry. Thought the quote was quite good tho :)M'on group 58

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   **Date: 10 February 2007**

Subject: Sooo Sorry   *Author: LH*

i' so sorry i've not posted anything yet, i came on last night to do it and webct wouldn't let me sign in! i'll get my bit up asap, providing it doesn't cut me off again)x

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   **Date: 11 February 2007**

Subject: Finally! Strengths and Weaknesses of both   *Author: L H*

At the time when Freud released his theory of personality, his ideas were greatly controversial. They challenged everything previously thought about the development of personality and were controversial for the time. As well as being frowned upon, Freud's psychodynamic approach has been criticized, both in his time and in more modern times. Many psychologists see it as a weak theory as it cannot be tested in a controlled, laboratory environment, which Freud himself admitted (Rosenzweig, 1992). Hypotheses based on this theory often cannot be disproved as the behaviour displayed could be argued as being an ego defence mechanism to cover up the feel thoughts or beliefs of the individual, and if hypotheses can be made, the concepts are often ambiguous and difficult to measure. Even some of Freud's previous 'followers' disagreed with his theory. One of these was Alfred Adler, who argued that rather than inborn sexual and aggressive instincts and drives which Freud argued were the basis of personality, it is actually social interest that motivates behaviour, in that people are constantly "striving for superiority." Anther of his former peers who disagreed with the theory was Carl Jung, who argued that humans have a collective unconscious which gives us memories gained throughout the history of the world as well as the personal unconscious which relates to each individuals own experiences. It has also been argued that in his theory, Freud did not include the necessary social and cultural factors involved in the development of personality and that behaviour was largely a cause of infantile sexuality, with no reference to the importance of the experience of adult life in the development of the personality. However, there has been strong evidence that childhood experiences do greatly influence the development of personality (Lewis, 1999).

    Despite the criticisms of Freud's theory of personality, there are many strengths to his argument. Although a great controversy at the time, Freud's theory has become a great influence in other fields such as psychology and psychiatry. Freud may have faced great anxiety over his theory at the time, but it has more recently been proven that unconscious mental and emotional processes do affect our behaviour and personality (Chartrand and Bargh, 2002; Erdelyi, 2001). Eysenck's theory of personality consists of the PEN model. This attempts to understand personality in three dimensions - psychosis, extroversion and neurosis. This model is widely accepted as being reliable and valid as it was developed using both correlational research methods and experimental research methods on animals as well as humans. Another reason why this model is credible is that the terms are easy to define; the range of personalities is clearly set out. However, this does have its drawbacks in that Eysenck is grouping many people together with a specific personality type based on only three categories which may seem too narrow to encompass the

wide range of complex personalities displayed in humans. In exploring this theory, Eysenck became one of the first psychologists to suggest that there is a biological basis for major personality traits, and that differences in certain areas of personalities are linked to differences in the patterns of arousal in the brain. Eysenck's theory also suggested that there was a genetic factor involved in the development of personality, which was proven in twin studies. It was found that identical twins share more personality traits than fraternal twins, which suggests that personality is affected by our genes and DNA (Loehlin et al., 1988; Plomin, 1997). Eysenck did comment that personality was influenced by life experience, but the way we react towards our experiences may be an inborn trait. However, Eysenck's theory does have its weaknesses. It may be argued that the model is not reliable and valid as people react to certain situations in different ways and have different coping mechanisms. For example, someone may sweat and become visibly uncomfortable during an unpleasant experience, whereas someone else could suffer in a more physical way, such as suffering from headaches.

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 12 February 2007

Subject: Putting it together   Author: LH

I'm in the process of putting the whole thing together the now so i'll post it at the end with a bit of what everyone has put up plus i added a wee bit more for the compatibility section, if you've got anything to add jus lemme know!. I finish my lecture at 11 so i'll be back online then and if theres nothing to add for fix i'll just post it then. That ok'x

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 12 February 2007

Subject: Re:Putting it together   Author: LH

The psychodynamic approach of the study of personality by Sigmund Freud is seen as controversial to many modern-day psychologists. His way of carrying out his experiments - more, observations - was sometimes thought of as unreliable. Freud managed to break away from traditional "experiments" to reach valuable conclusions about the process of evolution of a human's personality. This could be seen as a weakness to others that don't believe in his methods, but a strength to Freud himself, as it sets him apart. However, his theory has been greatly criticised and has had its many weaknesses pointed out. Many psychologists see it as a weak theory as it cannot be tested in a controlled, laboratory environment, which Freud himself admitted (Rosenzweig, 1992). Although it can be measured using Freud's idea of careful observation, many argue this is not sufficient evidence. Hypotheses based on this theory often cannot be disproved as the behaviour displayed due to Freud's theory of the ego defense mechanisms that mask impulses and so make the observational method particularly difficult in making judgements. If hypotheses can be made, the concepts are often ambiguous and difficult to measure. Even some of Freud's previous 'followers' disagreed with his theory. One of these was Alfred Adler, who argued that rather than inborn sexual and aggressive instincts and drives which Freud argued were the basis of personality, it is actually social interest that motivates behaviour, in that people are constantly "striving for superiority." Despite his many critics, it cannot be forgotten that it was Freud who first founded the theory of psychoanalysis. He

believed that "unconscious processes can affect behaviour." (Passer and Smith, Page 153) Although many disagree with Freud's theories it cannot be denied that his ideas have brought about many changes to the field of psychology. His work introduced and encouraged a deeper examining of the study and treatment of psychological disorders, attempts to try and understand the seriousness of such a disorder were only brought about once Freud had introduced the theory. Furthermore, although his ideas were not fully taken on board, they encouraged further research on issues such as dreams and aggression. His work was a stepping stone for further analysis and new psychological discoveries, including Chartrand & Bargh (2002) and Erdelyi (2001) who all carried out research in support of the unconscious mind existing, which is the basis of Freud's theory. Also, Lewis (1999) has recently found that childhood experiences do have an influence on the development of personality.There are a great number of strengths and weaknesses related to Hans J. Eysenck's theory of personality. Firstly the fact that the type of personality that people have whether that be an introverted or extroverted personality can be tested across a wide range of personality traits and so produce quite accurate and reliable results about what type of personality a person actually possesses. For example you can measure whether a person is an introvert or extrovert by how sociable they are and any number of other factors can also be taken into account when making such decisions about a person's personality. Eysenck's theory also suggested that there was a genetic factor involved in the development of personality, which was proven in twin studies. It was found that identical twins share more personality traits than fraternal twins, which suggests that personality is affected by our genes and DNA (Loehlin et al., 1988; Plomin, 1997). Eysenck did comment that personality was influenced by life experience, but the way we react towards our experiences may be an inborn trait. The PEN model of this theory of personality is widely accepted as being reliable and valid as it was developed using both correlational research methods and experimental research methods on animals as well as humans. Another reason why this model is credible is that the terms are easy to define (unlike Freud's terminology); the range of personalities is clearly set out. However, this does have its drawbacks in that Eysenck is grouping many people together with a specific personality type based on only three categories which may seem too narrow to encompass the wide range of complex personalities displayed in humans. In exploring this theory, Eysenck became one of the first psychologists to suggest that there is a biological basis for major personality traits, and that differences in certain areas of personalities are linked to differences in the patterns of arousal in the brain.However despite some of the obvious strengths of Eysenck's theory there are also some very apparent weaknesses in the theory. One such weakness that lies within the theory is the fact that different people may react differently to different situations e.g. someone may react to stress by sweating excessively whereas another person may suffer from severe headaches. This is known as individual and stimulus response specifity. Also the fact that people may have some of the personality traits that could see them classed as being an introvert or extrovert there may be broad variations in people's personalities and therefore to classify them as one or the other may be too broad a generalisation to make. Finally recent research has suggested that it may be too simple to relate levels of brain activation levels to levels of cortical arousal and that it may be specific brain structures that play a pivotal role in such a process.It is obvious that both Freud's theory of the stages of personality and Eysenck's Five Factor Model will have some similarities on the basis that both investigate the workings of the

mind and how different peoples personality causes them to react and respond to different stimuli (situations) in a large variety of ways. It is only until recent years however that similarities between the two theories have come to light. It has been established that the five-factor model is quite compatible with other popular psychological theories as well, not just those involved with factor analysis. It's been popular for some psychologists to link Eysenck's model and Freud's theories of psychoanalyses. For example, recent experiments have made evident links between Freud's concept of the ego and the variables in Eysenck's model. A report of a recent experiment conducted by Huey and Weiss (1997) focuses on ego resiliency and control in adolescent boys, "Ego resiliency seems to reflect, in part, the well adjusted pole of each FFM (five-factor model) dimension, whereas Ego under control...reflects high extroversion, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness."The parallels between elements of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis (known for its application, but also for its lack of consideration for surrounding environments) and elements of the Freud's FFM, helps to show the compatibility of the Five-factor Model with not only Freud's but multiple theories. The theories are also compatible in many other ways. Freud's theory on personality states that it is childhood stages that develop personality, whereas as Eysenck believed that the traits of personality are inborn and are rooted in genetics. However, Eysenck's theory also incorporates the importance of adult experience, which does make these theories incompatible in some ways. The theories are also incompatible in that Freud's theory is based on the idea that it is the unconscious mind that develops personality, whereas Eysenck's theory states that the way personality develops is largely due to genetics and inborn traits which cannot be controlled, consciously or unconsciously. Although these theories of personality are different in many ways and are to a certain degree incompatible, they do not have to agree to both be correct. Neither Freud nor Eysenck stated that personality could not possibly be developed as a combination of both childhood experience and inborn traits, and so over all are largely compatible theories in most areas.

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 12 February 2007

Subject: Re:Putting it together   Author: KG

yep, just had a wee read, think it sounds alrite. The last bit ive became a bit confused. Are we basically saying they arent the same, but a combination of the two may be the most comprehensive theory of personality, as they can compliment each other' x

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   Date: 12 February 2007

Subject: Re:Putting it together   Author: LH

Thats pretty much what I thought too, like that they might seem to contradict each other at first, but together they actually give a wider and more reliable theory of personality and how it's developed.x

Topic: Online Project 9 - Online Group Projects 58   **Date: 12 February 2007**

Subject: Re:Putting it together   Author: PR

Cheeers for putting it together a will take a turn this week of psoting the final group answer

Final Group Answer

Subject: Final Group Answer   Author: LH

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COMMENTARY ON THE RESPONSE OF GROUP 58

This group's answer would be creditable as an Honours level essay. As a first year answer, its depth, breadth, quality of analysis, and composition are unprecedented in my 12 years of experience in running the class. The group has found important material, e.g. on genetics, twin studies, and the five-factor model, which was not mentioned in lectures, and has shown its relevance to the question.

It should be noted that the two theories involved in the task reported above are not normally treated as compatible or even suitable for integration in text books; rather the usual practice is to highlight their differences.. It is fairly unlikely therefore that students were able to take any illicit shortcuts and drop ready made arguments from texts into their essay. This is one reason why the task was structured as it was, obliging students to do their own thinking. As a check on possible internet-based plagiarism, sections of this essay were entered into a Google search. No matches were found.

EVALUATION OF THE SCHEME

Students completed a brief questionnaire, asking for details of their experiences of the scheme, at the last class meeting of the year. Attendance at the last lecture has always been 'thin' and this year was no exception.

The questions asked, students' answers, and some basic statistics, are shown below:

Results of Student Survey on the Online Collaborative Project Scheme

Participants

The surveys were taken after the last class of the year, and in total 164 questionnaires were returned. Of these 69 (42%) were majoring in Psychology. 36 individuals recorded that they have changed their principal subject during the course of the year. Of these 35, 19 were dropping Psychology and 17 taking it up. 71 students (43%) had met up with at least one person in their group during the course of the year.

Responses to scaled questions

The questionnaire asked students to register their degree of agreement (where 1= agree and 5 = disagree) on a number of statements about the project. The results are shown graphically below.

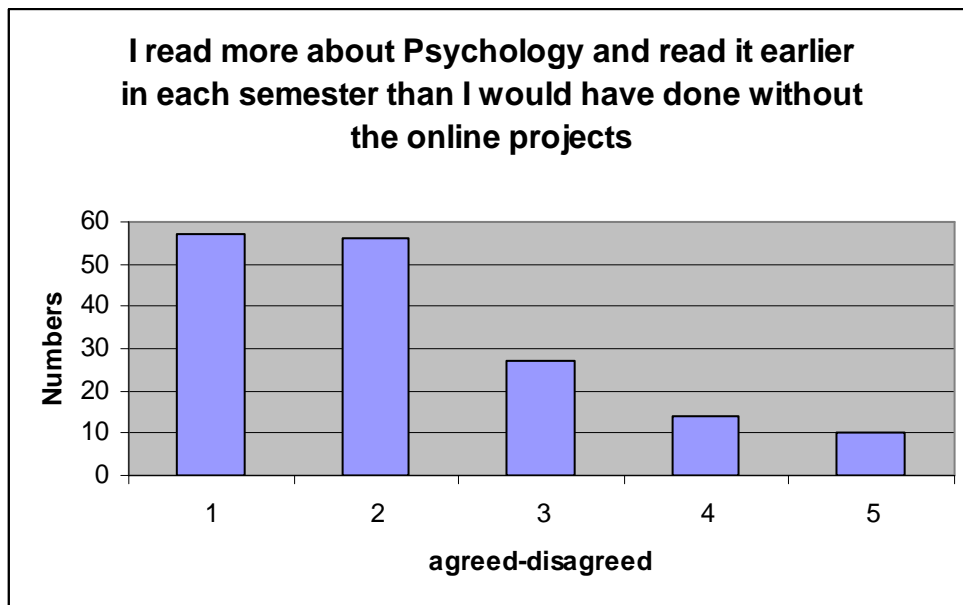**Figure 1. Response to statement "I read more about Psychology and read it earlier…"**

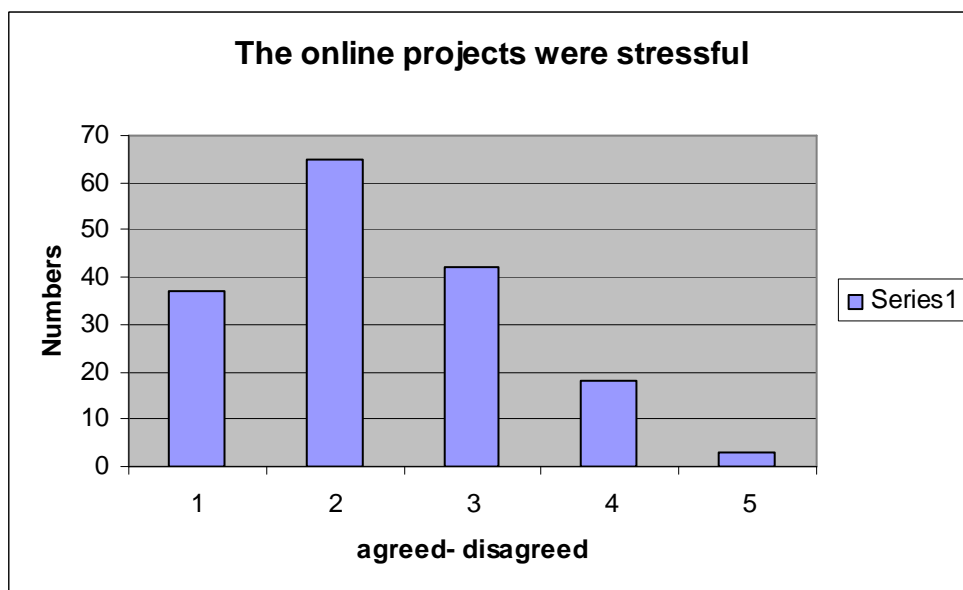**Figure 2: Response to statement "The online projects were stressful…"**

Figure 3: Response to statement "I only did as much reading as I had to…"

I only did as much reading as I had to to make my own contribution to the projects and didn't bother with the rest of the recommended material
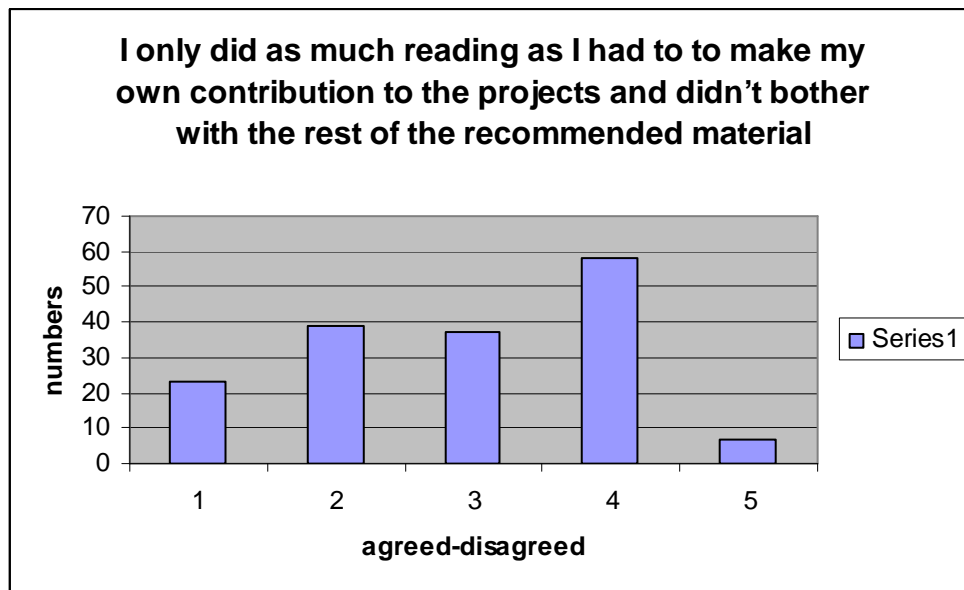

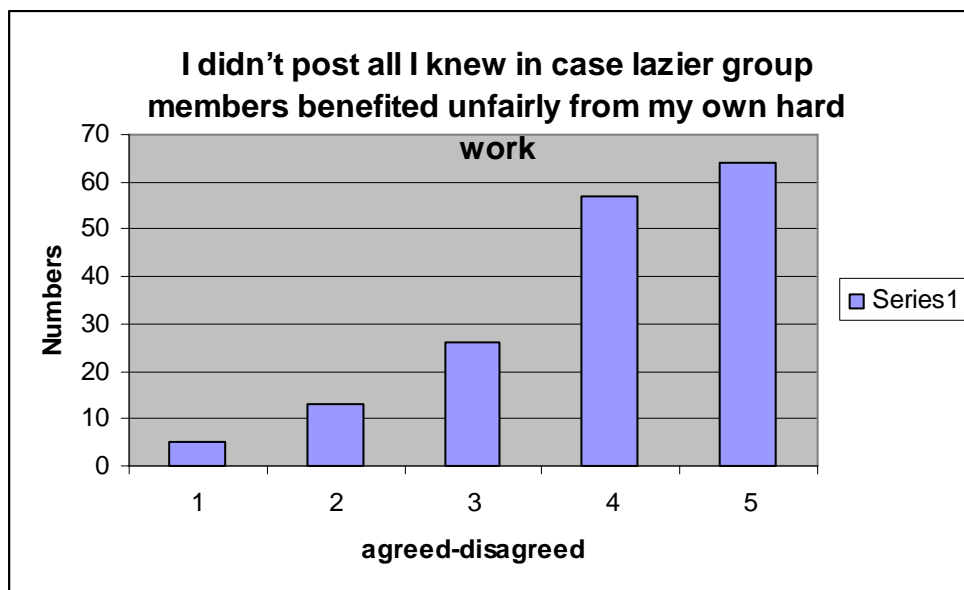**Figure 4: Response to statement "I didn't post all I knew in case lazier group members benefited…"**

I didn't post all I knew in case lazier group members benefited unfairly from my own hard work

Figure 5: Response to statement "I learned more in Psychology because of online projects than... in other subjects"

I learned more in Psychology because of online projects than I did in my other subjects

Figure 6: Response to statement "I had to work harder at Psychology than I expected..."

I had to work harder at Psychology than I expected to
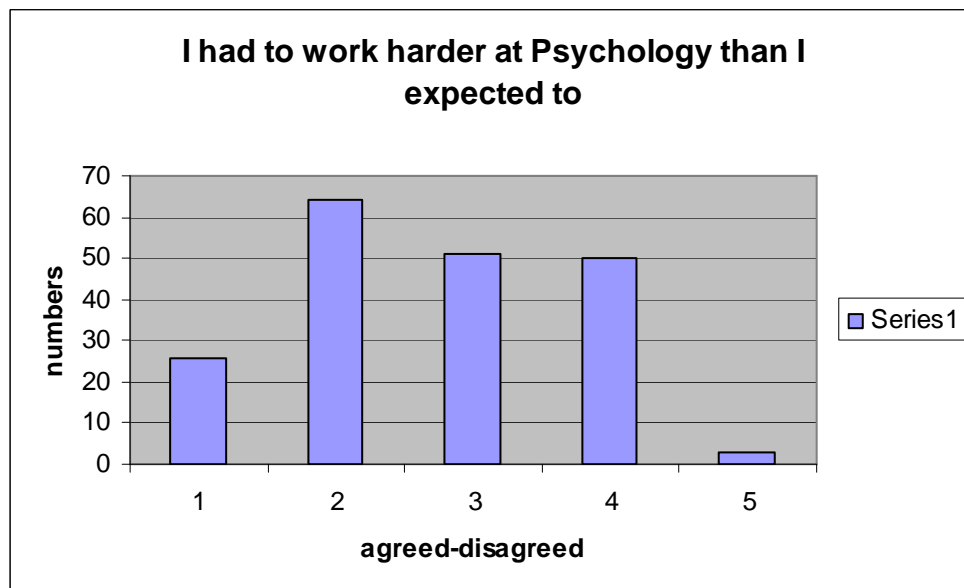
Figure 7: Response to statement "I made friends as a direct result of the online project"
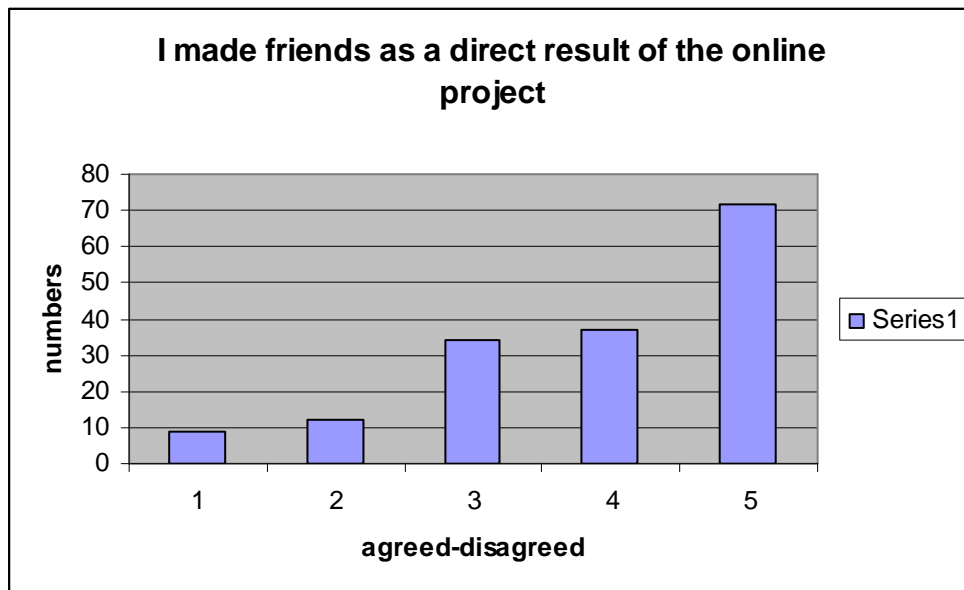
Figure 8: Response to statement "I was reluctant to suggest improvements to the group members' work…"

Figure 9: Response to statement "It would be better to scrap the online scheme and return to the traditional…"

It would be better to scrap the online scheme and return to the traditional two lectures per week system

numbers — agreed - disagreed
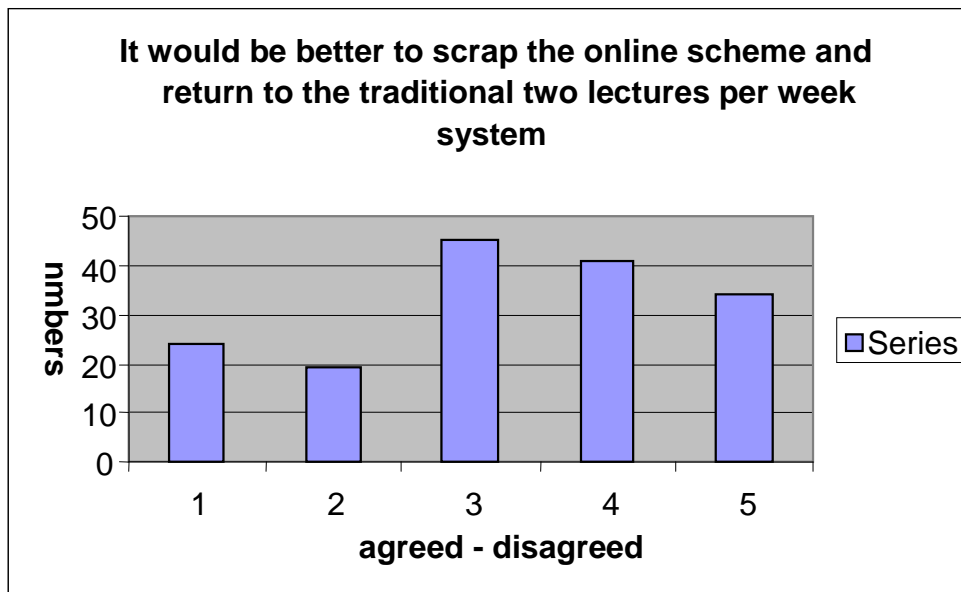
Figure 10: Response to statement "I found that reading other people's contributions helped me understand Psychology"

I found that reading other people's contributions helped me understand Psychology

numbers — agreed-disagreed
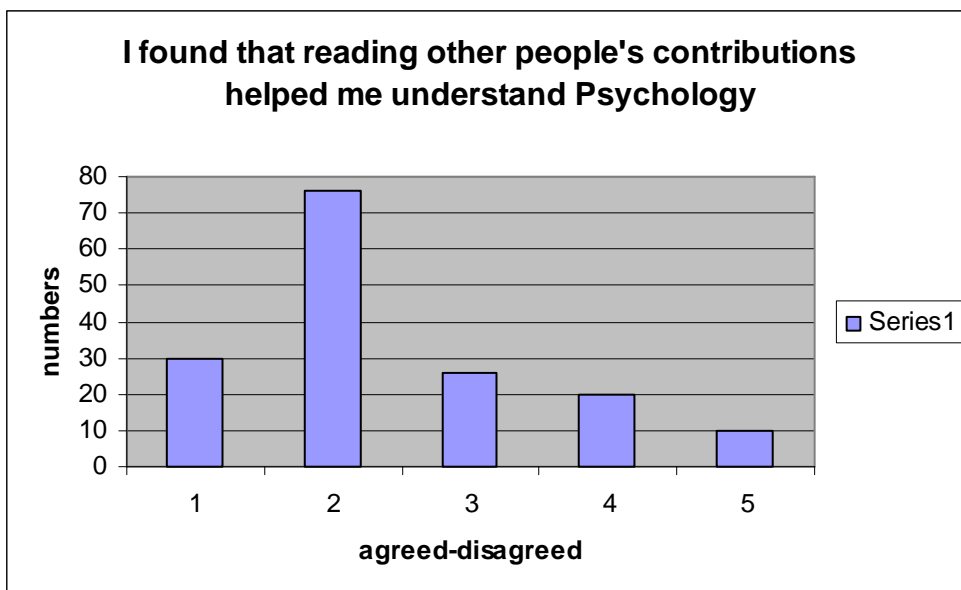
Figure 11: Response to statement "The feedback based on other students' work helped me understand how to improve my own answers"
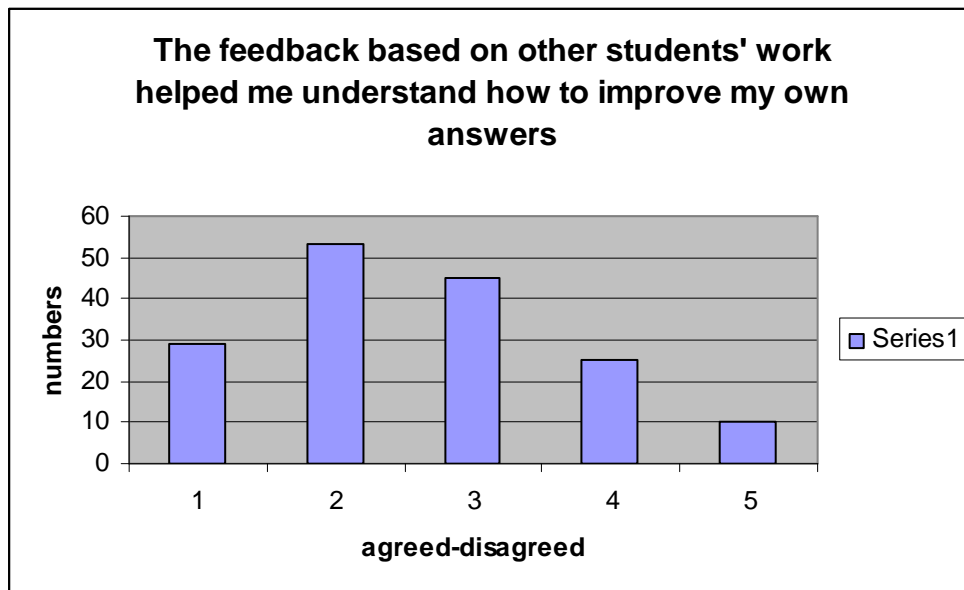
Figure 12: Response to statement "The on-line projects made me feel that I was more interested in Psychology"
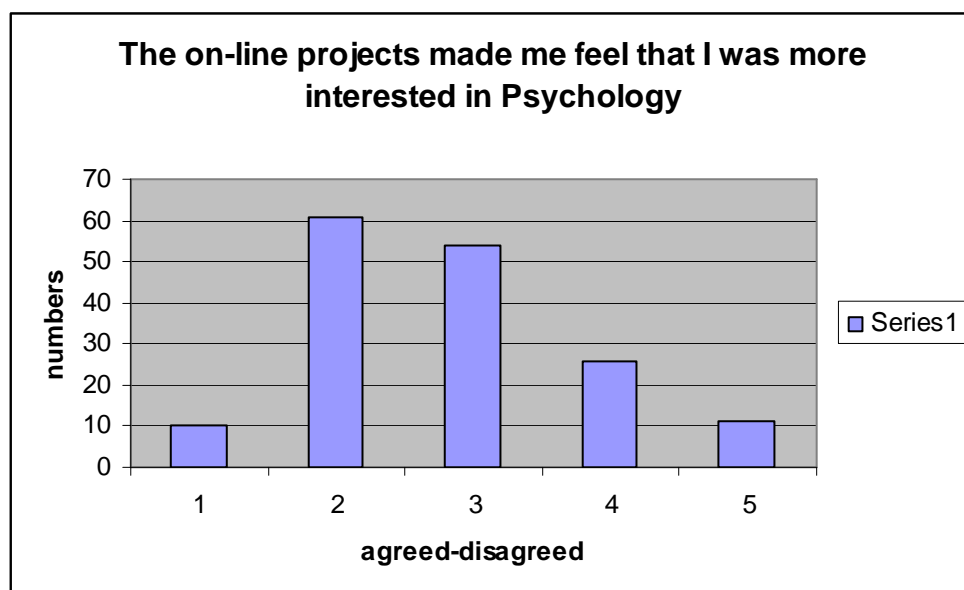
Figure 13: Response to statement "The on-line projects helped me to feel more positively about the university"
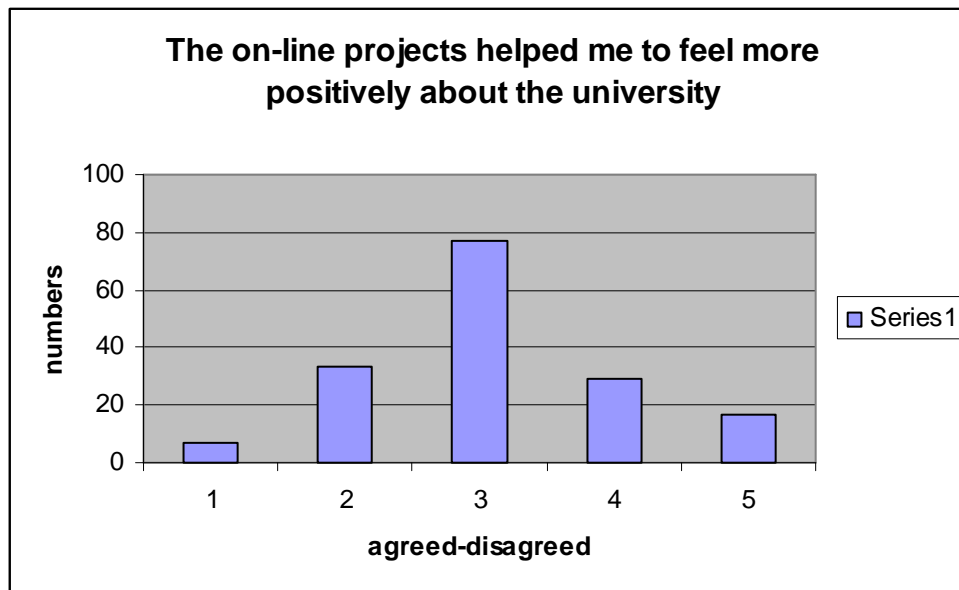
Summary of responses

The majority of the responses to the questions reflected positively on the collaborative on-line assessment model, with more students agreeing that;

- They read more about Psychology and earlier in each semester than they would have done without the project
- That they learned more in Psychology (because of the on-line projects) than they did in the other projects.
- Reading other peoples' contributions helped them understand Psychology.
- The feedback (based on other students' work) helped them improve their own answers
- The online projects made them feel more interested in Psychology
- They had to work harder in Psychology than they expected to.
- That it would not be better to scrap the online system

It would appear also that

- The students' view of the university was not affected either positively or negatively.
- Students did not restrict contributions in case other "lazier" students benefited.
- Students were not reluctant to suggest improvements to other students' work.

However the questionnaire also highlighted that the majority of the students

- Found the projects were stressful
- Did not make friends as a direct result of the project

Differences in responses between students studying psychology as their principal subject and other students.

There were statistically significant differences between responses on the following questions from Elective students (ESs) and students for whom Psychology was the Principal Subject.

- ESs were less likely to report that they "read more about Psychology and read it earlier in each semester than they would have done without the online projects. (Mean difference = 0.494, t=2.699, p=0.008)
- ESs were less likely to report that they "learned more in Psychology because of online projects than they did in other subjects" (Mean difference =0.634, t= 3.74, p < 0.000.)
- ESs were less likely to report that they "the on-line projects made them feel more interested in psychology". (Mean difference = 0.804, t=5.411, p < 0.000.

Key correlations

1. There were statistically significant correlations (positive and negative) between students who reported that they" learned more in Psychology because of online projects than they did in other subjects" and those that reported:
- That the online projects made them more interested in Psychology (+0.575**)
- Positive feelings towards the university (+0.528**)
- Read more Psychology than they would otherwise have (0.461**).
- That they wanted to scrap the scheme (-0.455**)

2. There was a statistically significant correlation between students who reported that "the project made them more interested in psychology" and those that reported;
- Positive feelings towards the university (+0.676**)
- Learning more in psychology than other subjects due to online project (0.575**)
- That they wanted to scrap the scheme (-.492**).

3. There was a statistically significant correlation between students who reported that "reading other peoples contributions helped me to understand Psychology", and those that reported;
- Feedback helped me understand how to improve my own answers (0.486**)
- Positive feelings towards the university (0.421**)

4. There was a statistically significant (negative) correlation between students who reported that they wished to scrap the scheme and those that reported;
- reading other peoples contributions helped me to understand Psychology (-0.423**)
- That the online projects made them more interested in Psychology (-0.492**)
- Positive feelings towards the university (-0.516**).
- Learning more in psychology than other subjects due to online project (-0.455**).

COMMENTARY ON THE STUDENT EVALUATIONS

Generally, these evaluations suggest that the scheme was successful in its principal aim of getting students to read about psychology much earlier and in more depth than they would have done otherwise. The majority of the respondents also reported that this effect was unique to psychology, as a result of the online scheme, and that reading others' contributions and the generic feedback assisted their learning. It is also notable that students already intending to continue with psychology tended to report that their intention was reinforced by the scheme.

The scheme did not however prove to be of much social benefit of the class, with the great majority reporting that they had not made new friends as a by-product of its operation. Also, it should be noted that there is some evidence of a reluctance to correct or constructively criticise other students' work. It is proposed to address this 'feedback-gap' by modifying the scheme in academic year 2007-2008 to provide individual groups and students with more detailed tutor-led 'feedback on their feedback' once each project has been completed. I.e., rather than correcting the groups' answers, which may undermine the purpose of the scheme in that students may merely wait for the 'right answer', the

tutor-led feedback will attempt to build students' confidence in their judgements and encourage them to take greater responsibility for providing fellow group-members with constructive criticism. Generic feedback will continue to be posted.

That most students reported the scheme to be more or less stressful is a concern. This problem may be alleviated by a major structural change to the Faculty's First Year Programme in 2007-2008 whereby students will be required to study only four subjects rather than five, as was the case in 2006-2007 and previously. On the other hand, the reported stressfulness does tend to indicate that the majority of students took the scheme seriously.

A major test of the academic worth of the scheme will come in June 2007, when the final examination marks of the class will be available for comparison with results from previous years.