RESEARCH ARTICLE

ADDING A SOCIAL DIMENSION TO ONLINE EDUCATION AT QASSIM COLLEGE OF MEDICINE.

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Manuscript Info	Abstract
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Introduction; Online blended learning has been a standard feature at Qassim College of Medicine for six years. Keeping students interested in e-learning and facilitating online courses have always posed challenges, following mainstream usage of social networks by students. Methodology; Sixty-six Students enrolled in a Surgery course in 2014 were exposed to social networking, which comprised open discussions, posting comments, and the use of multimedia features as means to enhance their commitment to the course and engagement level. Results; The social networking component was quite popular among students who; posted their daily activities, clinical training sessions, and pictures, accompanied by many comments and discussions. All survey respondents said that it enhanced their level of engagement in e-learning, 89% said that it helped them learn online, and 11% said that it had affected their time negatively. Conclusions; The results confirm the potential of social networks in facilitating student engagement in courses. However, there proved to be a need to improve social networks for use in education and to manage the time aspect for the students' benefit.

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Introduction:-

For the past 100 years, school has been assumed to be the primary site of learning. However, increasingly, school is no longer considered to be the only place of learning, a trend particularly supported by the use of computer networks (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Ito et al., 2009; Thomas & Brown, 2011).

A proliferation of information and communication technology - (ICT-) supported learning and teaching is, of late, offering various educational opportunities to online and face-to-face students in higher education (Stacey & Wiesenberg, 2007; Szeto, 2011). Moreover Blended synchronous approaches to learning and teaching are gaining currency in the changing higher education landscape. (Szeto, 2014).

Social factors, referring to how participants in asynchronous learning networks (ALN) relate to each other, must be taken into account in the design and development of computer-mediated courses (Wegerif, 1998). The current popularity and growth of Web-based social networking tools is prompting many educators within organizations and institutions, including higher education, all over the world to consider ways in which these tools could enhance online learning (Salaway, 2008; Weekes, 2008; Young, 2007).

As this new century progresses, technological development provide students and facilitators with an opportunity to enhance social presence in distance education courses. In our Employment of these new technologies, we can

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expand our ability to communicate with classmates and other professionals around the world (Kristopher & Abbie, 2009).

According to Rovai (2002), "Online learners who have a stronger sense of community and perceive greater cognitive learning should feel less isolated and have greater satisfaction with their academic programs, possibly resulting in fewer dropouts". Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) found that "social presence could be promoted in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting by employing strategies that encourage interaction". Other studies have shown that, not only does a learning community increase the persistence of students enrolled in online programs, but that it also enhances information exchange, learning support, group commitment, collaboration, and learning satisfaction (Dede, 1996; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Wellman, 1999).

An online learning community usually comprisesa technical platform, learning tasks, and social interaction between the students (Carabajal, La Pointe & Gunawardena, 2003; Tu & Corry, 2002).The social dimension refers to participants maintenance of some degree of mutual caring and understanding through regular interaction. During the online learning process, members of a student group develop a sense of belonging, socio-emotional bonds, and good relationships (Wang, 2005). Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the students' perceptions and satisfaction with the presence of social activities in the online course.

Methodology:-
In order to investigate social and affective interaction among students in online learning programs, 60 Students (39 males and 21 females students) who had enrolled in Surgery course in 2014were exposed to social networking activities referred to as students' own activities during the course (Figure 1).In this regard, the students could engage in open discussions (Figure 2), comment (Figure 3) and use multimedia features as means to enhance their commitment to the course and their engagement.

We encouraged students to use this site where they could initiate activities (Figure 4), post readings (figure 5), post their social activities (Figure 6) and express their opinions freely (Figure 7).

We conducted a survey among the students following their completion of the online course. Our purpose was to explore the 'students' perceptions of and their satisfaction with the presence of social activities in the online course.

Results:-
The social networking component was quite popular among the students. They posted their daily activities, clinical training sessions and pictures, accompanied by many comments and discussions.

A questionnaire consisting of six questions was uploaded on the site following completion of the course (Table 1). The items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 to 5; with 1 indicating 'Definitely Agree' and 5 indicating 'Definitely Disagree'

Fifty-fife of 60 students (91.7%) completed the questionnaire; this included 19 out of 21 (90.5%) females and 36 out of 39 (92.3%) males.

When asked, "Do social forums helped you engage in e-Learning and with on line educational material? "approximately 73% of students agreed, and 13 % did not agree. The remaining students selected Not Sure.
Forty-nine students (81.7%) said that on line social activities helped them learn online and were not time consuming; six (10%) said that the activities were time consuming.

When asked to rate their experiences, 100% of the respondents indicated that it encouraged their engagement in e-learning.

Some of the students stated that; one of the drawbacks of the social activity on the e-learning site was "that they felt embarrassed" because with any activity that they engaged in on the site their names would be obvious to all the students. This is why they requested that their names be hidden on the site. Interestingly, others said that online

activity leads to sloth and possibly physical inactivity. Others said that it was beneficial as they could rapidly find and share information. The activities ensured that course was fun and enjoyable.

Discussion:-

The social aspects of learning are known to be valuable. Yet, students enrolled in online programs continue to feel lonely and isolated. To address this, participants must learn more about each other; in this manner, trust and a social dimension can be incorporated into online learning environments (Olsson, 2014).

Kear, Chetwynd, and Jefferis (2014) stated that, it is better to learn about others from their posts: You can tell all you need to know about a person from the messages they post.

Our experience during the course proved that, the social networking component was quite popular among students. The students posted their daily activities, clinical training sessions, and pictures, accompanied by many comments and discussions. This is similar to Kim, Kwon and Cho. (2011) and Richardson and Swan's(2003)view that, studies on online learning have found associations between perceptions of social presence and satisfaction with the learning experience.

Greyling, Kara, Makka, and VanNiekerk (2008) stated that, it is important that students visit the online course component regularly. One of the strategiesemployed in the current study to achieve this aim was to create a social dimension in the online course environment. Teaching with technology can easily be associated with cold and impersonal teaching-learning environments. Therefore, an effort was made to create a warm, personalized, inviting, visual and informative environment that was updated every week. The intention was to make the online course component an attractive and rewarding information-portal for students to visit at least once per week.

Maintaining online social presence required the lecturing team to do the following:
1. Update the course's home page every week with concise and informative text and visuals, were linked to an important learning outcome for that week.
2. Encourage students to debate course-related issues in the discussion forum.
3. Contribute to discussions.
4. Continuously moderate student's contributions to the discussion board.
Promptly respond to student posts (within 48 hours) Greyling, et al. (2008).

The practices outlined above are, to a large extent, similar to those implemented in our course.

In our study some of the students stated that; one of the drawbacks of the social activity on the e-learning site was "that they felt embarrassed" because whenever they engaged in an activity, their names would be obvious to all the students, which is why, after completing the course, they requested that their names be hidden on the site.

This finding is similar to those obtained by (Berlanga, Bitter-Rijpkema, Brouns, Sloep and Fetter (2011), Chen and Marcus (2012), and Mesch and Beker 2010). These authors, reported that several students had concerns about privacy, which is an increasingly important issue in online environments. However, studies have found negative, as well as positive, effects of personal profiles and photos on the on-line activities. Cress (2005) found that personal profiles (consisting of photos and short descriptions of the students) had a positive effect on group interaction for some members of online groups (those who were more individually oriented) and a negative effect for others (those who were more group-oriented). In contrast, Tanis and Postmes (2007) found that member photos and names had a negative effect on participants' satisfaction with the online interactions. Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell(2001) found that member photos had a positive effect on the activities for newly formed groups of learners who were set to work together for a short time, but a negative effect for groups working on a more long-term basis. In all these studies, the researchers suggested that personal profiles can reduce some participants' sense of solidarity. In relation to Kear et al. (2014) reported that personal profiles and images were important to some students with regard to increasing social presence, but by no means to all. This is, to a large extent, similar to our view.

According to Stanford Report Staff (2012) "Students really know how to use social networking platforms to spread new ideas and think collectively, so bringing this dimension into learning, and combining it with face-to-face interaction, can generate a lot of excitement". This was also proven by our results.

Conclusion:-

The study results, confirms the potential of social networks in facilitating student engagement in courses. However this is not without the negative aspects thereof, which highlight the importance of improving the functions of social networks in an educational context and of managing the time aspect for the benefit of students.
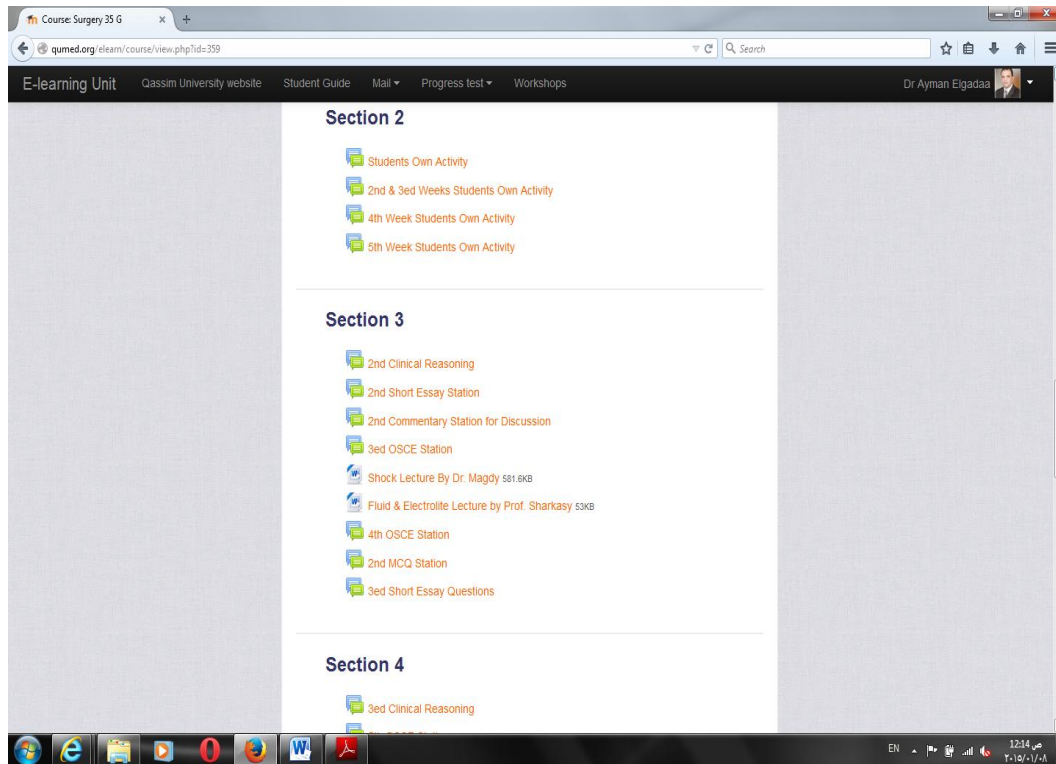

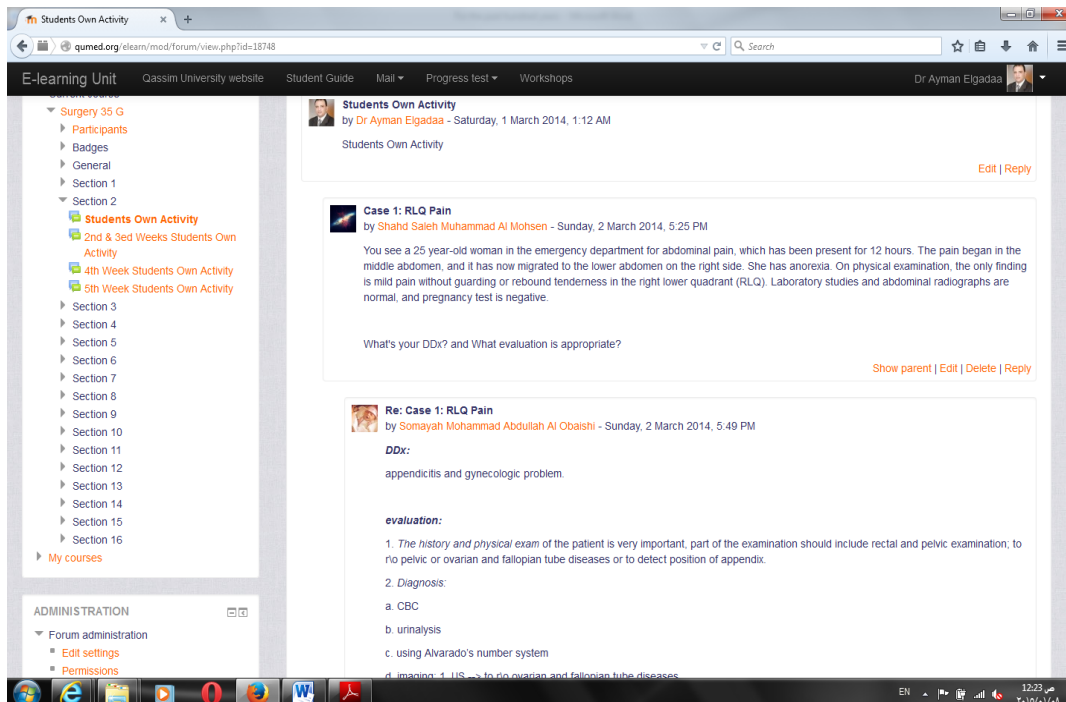**Figure 1:-** Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

Figure 2:- Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.
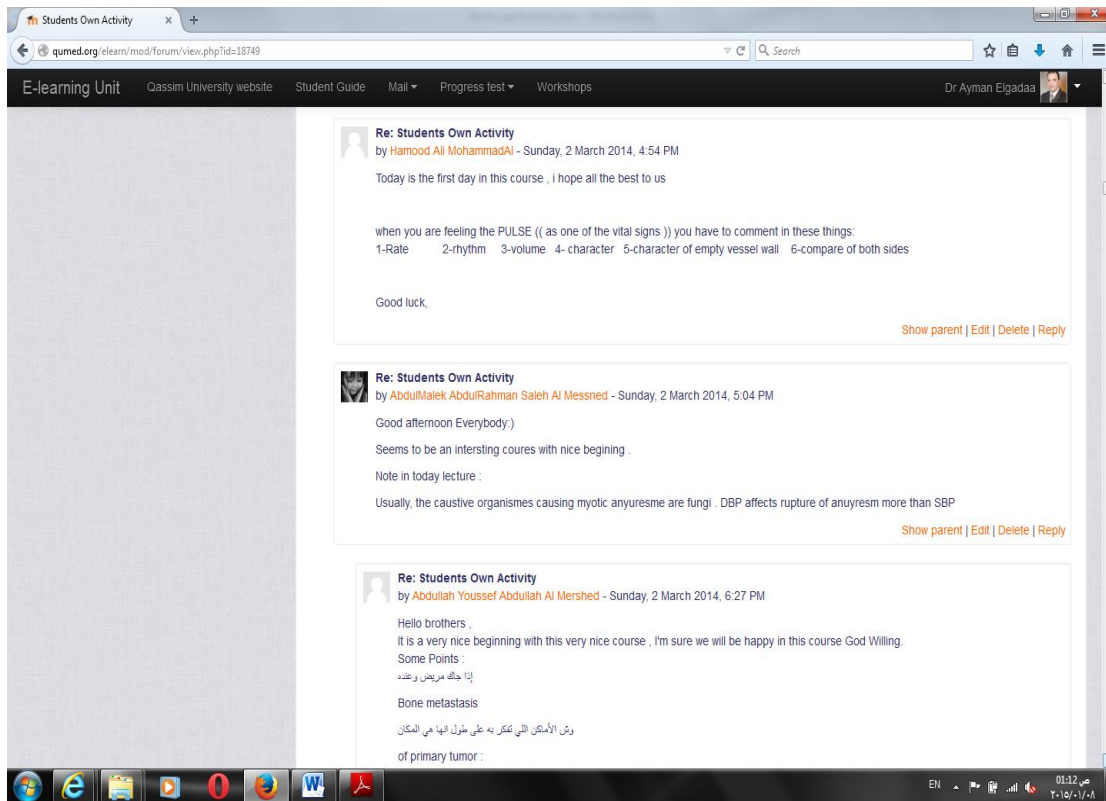
Figure 3:- Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

Figure 4:- Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

Figure 5:- Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

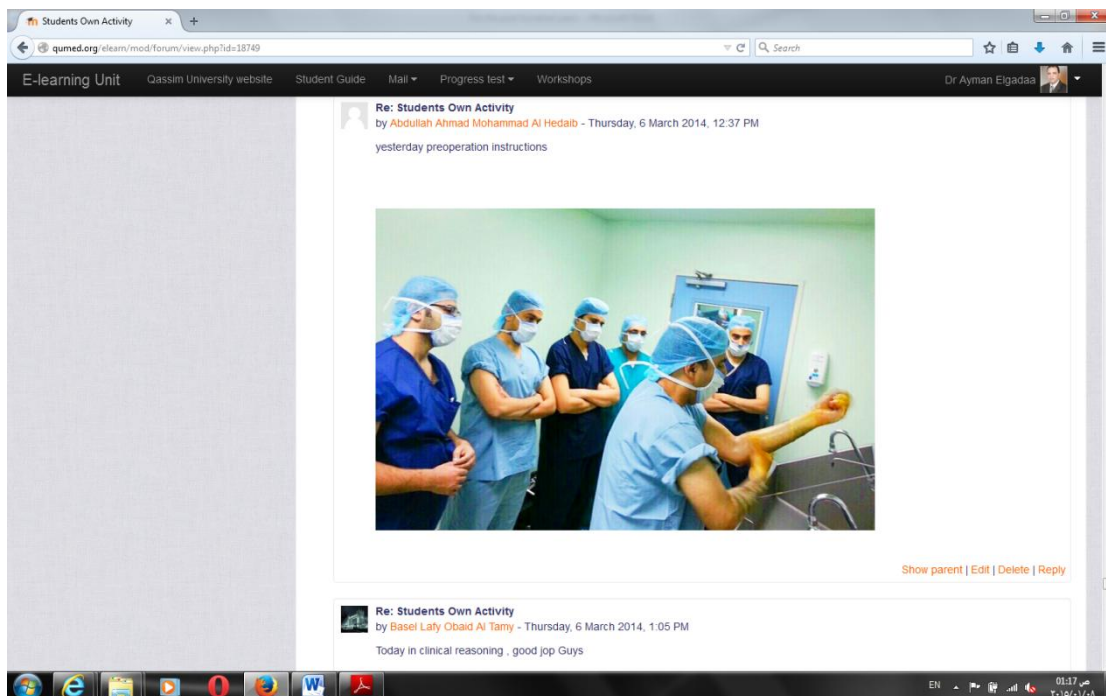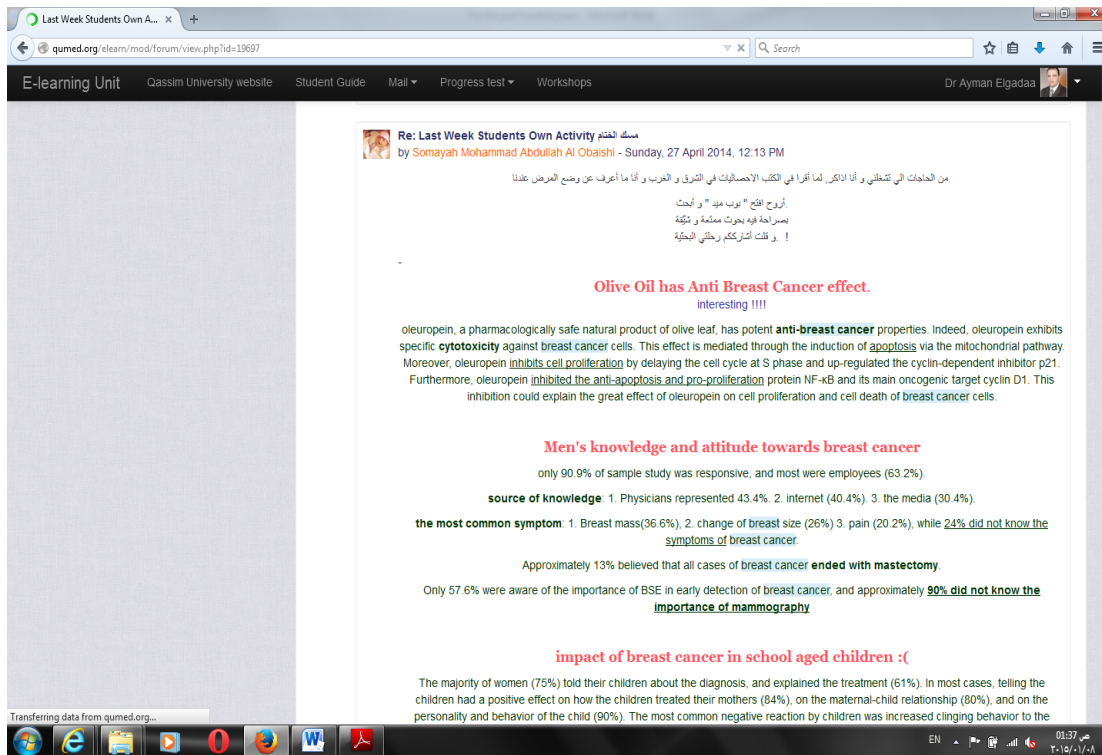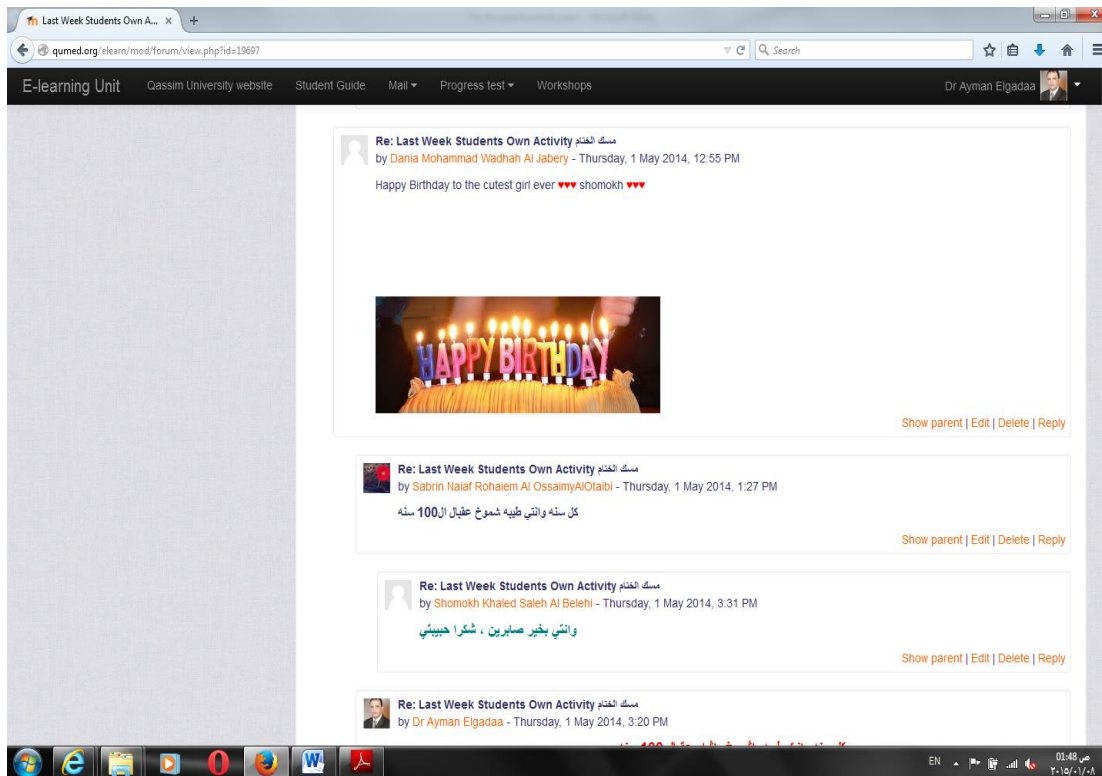**Figure 6:-** Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

Figure 7:- Qumed.org/elearn, Surgery Course: Prof. Ayman AlGadaa, 2014.

1: Definitely Agree 2: Agree 3: Not Sure 4: Disagree 5: Definitely Disagree	1	2	3	4	5
1. Do social forums help you engage in online and educational material?					
2. Do you take advantage of educational forums and online presence, in a way that supports your learning and engagement to the course?					
3. Do you think that social networking forums are a waste of time?					
4. Do you think that there is a need for online social forums for students?					
5. How would you rate the experience? With zero indicating Worst and 10 indicating Best.					
6. Insert your suggestions her or comments regarding, positive or negative aspects.					

(Table 1)

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