Chapter 3

Promoting Learner Interaction and Personalized Learning Experiences with a Google+ Social Media Model:
How to Replace the Traditional Discussion Forum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the Directed Google+ Community model (DG+) as an alternative to the traditional discussion board forum. Social media platforms exhibit characteristics that can be leveraged in course design to promote positive learner experiences. Specifically, the chapter will define the DG+ model; examine how it promotes learner interaction, discussion, collaboration and peer review; discuss how it supports course topics, course assignments and creates a searchable knowledge management system; and explain how it complements the use of a learning management system for grade reporting purposes. Both the instructor and the students experience benefits from this design tool. The chapter will also discuss ways to overcome potential obstacles to implementing the model.

INTRODUCTION

Quality communications between students and the instructor is a significant dynamic affecting course outcomes. Any instructor who has taught the same course more than one time knows each course group has a different disposition even though the content and activities of the course remain relatively static. There is a kaleidoscope of reasons for this, the discussion of which is outside the purview of this chapter, but what is relevant is the way in which certain aspects of learner behavior can be leveraged to promote desired learning outcomes.

Class discussions contribute to peer collaboration, sense of community and learner perceptions whether they occur in face-to-face classroom settings, online via a threaded discussion board or asynchronously using some other bulletin board type tool. The use of threaded discussion boards in higher education courses is common, but the design of this tool does not adequately support students' needs with respect to constructive communication scenarios. The purpose of this chapter is to provide instructional designers and instructors with a practical tool that maximizes the potential of asynchronous communications. More than that, the chapter is intended to be a workshop experience guiding the reader through the process of applying the Directed Google+ Community model (DG+) to instructional practice.

Background

Discussion forums are an often used learning activity in both face-to-face and online courses whether the course is offered synchronously, asynchronously or is a hybrid of these options. In this context discussion forums refer to threaded discussion boards which are typically housed within a learning management system (LMS). Participation is limited to students enrolled in the course and their instructor(s). Organizations utilizing the discussion forum include brick and mortar universities as well as online learning platforms that host massive open online courses (MOOCs).

With respect to the effectiveness of discussion forums, historically research has examined the learning outcomes (Kay, 2006; Thomas, 2002), influence of instructor participation (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003, 2007), and the optimal design of discussion board environments (Levine, 2007) including the ways in which structured and unstructured forums promote learner engagement (Salter & Conneely, 2015). Instructor social presence has been identified as a contributing factor to learner participation, development of a sense of community (Aragon, 2010), learner perception of satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Swan & Shih, 2005), and learner perception of personal achievement (Shin, 2002). More recently, massive open online courses (MOOC's) have provided rich sources of data for scrutinizing the ways in which discussion forums affect learners. Similarly, research topics include instructor presence, development of learning communities and peer support (Sharif & Magrill, 2015), as well as the potential impact of active participants to enrich discussions (Wong, Pursel, Divinsky, & Jansen, 2015) and discussion behaviors that correlate with learning gains (Wang, Yang, Wen, Koedinger, & Rosé, 2015). This research reveals two focal topics to consider when designing discussion forums; one addresses the social nature of people while the other addresses how they interpret their experience.

Obstacles to learner success and participation in discussion environments include time commitment, misunderstanding of written communications between participants, and site navigation problems (Kay, 2006). Synchronous vs asynchronous discussion options can also be problematic for learners depending on the content area, as some topics require immediate feedback while others benefit from the opportunity to formulate structured responses (Nandi, Hamilton, & Harland, 2015). Gender may also play a role in modality choice of distance discussions. There is evidence to suggest male learners prefer text based communication while female learners prefer audio or video communication (Ching & Hsu, 2015). Again, there are two focal topics to consider; one addresses the functionality of how people use the forum and the other addresses their perception of conversation.

Social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are increasingly applied to learning activities (Wankel, 2009). Research investigating social media use in educational applications has examined stimuli promoting instructors to utilize social media as well as effects of that use, which include learner satisfaction and learning outcomes (Cao & Hong, 2011). There are indications that social media use may be

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