



Learning With Online Activities: What Do Students Think About Their Experience?

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ABSTRACT

Learning through social interactions and critical thinking is becoming a fundamental teaching approach, especially for adult students. This approach promotes holistic and deeper understanding for the subject being learned. Online technologies are offering us new opportunities to create communities of inquiry that allow for more active learning that enhances students' critical thinking. This article introduces an exploratory case in a Middle Eastern context that uses multiple online activities to supplement and strengthen the students' face-to-face learning environment. This interpretive case discusses the students' perceptions of their experience when using online activities. The case indicates that students improved their learning, are very positive about their first interaction with online activities and would like to see it as a standard practice to supplement their face-to-face learning. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Active Learning; Asynchronous Communications; Case Study; Middle East; Online Learning Community; Social Constructivism

INTRODUCTION

Didactic or teacher-centered teaching is still seen as the dominate approach for teaching in the Arab Countries (UNDP, 2005). This approach fails to provide higher-order thinking. Higher order thinking is a term used as an umbrella to include skills that go beyond knowledge acquisition, like critical thinking and becoming self-directed. Critical thinking includes, cognitive activities such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation (self examination & correction) (Facione, 2007). Dewey (1982) defines critical

thinking as “reflective thought”, i.e. to suspend judgment, to be both skeptical and open minded; and to achieve this requires both intellectual and emotional ability. Self-direction is also an essential skill to be instilled in our students, which is an important ingredient for effective learning (Garrison et al, 2003). We want learners to become responsible in controlling and managing their learning and to go beyond rote memorization.

The recent World Bank Report (2008) states the Middle East is still in need of education reform and fails to meet the needs of the invading globalized economy despite the high investment

in education. The report also emphasizes that education in the region focuses too much on rote memorization, neglecting higher-order skills and complex communications that are critical to further advancement. Benard (2006) has made a similar argument about the need for reform in education for it become a tool for change. Benard quotes Tibi (1981), in which he argues that the problem in education in the Arab world is due to the teaching approaches.

Problem-oriented thinking cannot be learned through raw memorization. Traditional education, which expands its energies in no creative thinking but in memorization and reproduction, cannot produce a functioning intellectual group able to pose problems, define them, analyze them and finally solve them.

The World Bank report (2008) also makes a recommendation for the need for teacher training in higher-order learning with emphasis on soft skills.

The teacher-centered approach relies solely on pedagogies that emphasize rote memorization, and very little on higher order thinking. In this transmission paradigm, students are passive and may lack the motives to continue learning or retain knowledge (Felder et al. 1995). This style of teaching can be stressing, exhausting and not suitable for adult learners in particular, who have difficulties in memorizing facts. In-addition, it does not enhance the student's working skills that require engaging and communicative abilities or even train them for lifelong learning and for becoming self-directed. The teacher-centered approach can also make teachers bored due to their static and mechanistic role in teaching. This staleness can also be mirrored in the students (Fink, 2003). There is some evidence that the teacher-centered approach may be more effective with students with lower intellectual abilities (Saulnier et al., 2008; Talbert et al., 1993). However, the current literature on education theories are in favor of the student-centered approach,

In a teacher-centered paradigm, lectures usually follow a linear fashion moving from

one topic to the other, with several stops for memory testing. Deep understanding and building relationships between the various topics is uncommon. In this approach students learn in fragments and usually end with vague ideas of the overall course content and do not see knowledge relevancy. Students failing to see connected knowledge make it difficult to accumulate and apply knowledge in other subjects or in their working lives (Entwistle, 2003; Gow et al., 1993).

To make learning more significant requires us to experiment with more active pedagogies to supplement the passive and disintegrated style of instruction. Active pedagogies are based on activities that encourage dialogue, critical thinking, and collaborating (Long et al., 2005). These activities may be exercised in face-to-face and or in online environments. Online technologies are offering us new opportunities to create communities of inquiry that allow for higher-order learning that enhances students' critical thinking (Garrison et al., 2000; Imel, 2001; Bates, 1997; Duffy et al., 1996).

This article examines a case study on the use of online environment as one way to improve students' learning at one of the universities in Jordan. Jordan is one Middle Eastern countries where education is being put in the forefront as the means for social and economic development. The effective use of technologies is at the core of this initiative to improve teaching practices for active learning.

The study discusses implementing open-source software learning management system to deliver online activities to supplement face-to-face teaching of information systems-related subjects at the postgraduate level. The online environment includes a combination of online activities that are grounded in social constructivism educational theory. The article provides an interpretation of the experience gained, which had a positive outcome on students' learning. The results should encourage other faculties to seriously consider using online technologies to create an engaging learning environment that can promote a significant learning experience (Fink, 2003). This study adds to the emergent

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