Chapter 2.13
Resurrecting Graduate Conversation through an Online Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on action research that implements online learning community (OLC) software to foster conversation at a specific graduate school. The design of the research is informed by theories of conversation, online learning, and social networking, as well as by popular Web 2.0 technologies. A distinguishing feature of this application is that it is oriented toward and controlled by individuals rather than being centered on courses. Results indicate that stakeholders—graduate students and faculty—appreciate and find value in the OLC we implemented.

INTRODUCTION

The leaders of our school, a graduate school in the United States, believe that its continued success depends on the existence of a vibrant intellectual conversation among its stakeholders—students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Unfortunately, recent trends (primarily a decrease in the presence of stakeholders on campus) have led to a reduction in the vitality of this essential conversation. To help foster and revive it, these same leaders have asked our research group to design and implement an information-technology- (IT-) based solution.

Our guiding philosophy has been to allow people to say what they want to say, listen to what

they want to listen to, increase their understanding both of themselves and of their fellow community members, and do it all without having to spend an increased amount of time on campus. To this end, we have implemented software designed to promote free expression of identity and ideas by and between individuals. Our intent has not been to replace face-to-face interactions, but to supplement them with a persistent virtual component.

After Phase I of our research cycle, we believe that we have achieved a measure of success in improving conversation at our school and also in learning how conversation can be promoted by IT. This article presents an explanation of the nature of our school's problem, what we did to design and implement a solution, the effect of the solution on our school to date, what is planned for the future, and how our work contributes to research.

BACKGROUND

Bringing Conversation Online

Etched on the perimeter wall of our school is a phrase, "The center of a college is in great conversation and out of the talk of the college life springs everything else." This observation is widely accepted at our school, especially by our project stakeholders, but it has some problems as a compass for taking action.

Conversation (to say nothing of great conversation) is difficult to define, even when viewed in terms of a specific population—in our case, graduate students, faculty, administrators, and alumni. To make progress, we adopted a simple initial working definition of conversation as purposeful (i.e., related to graduate school activities) peer-to-peer talk. More formally, conversation is a speech exchange system that is structured around turn-taking, a sequential organization of who gets to say what and when (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). Because speech acts need not be oral or face-to-face, conversation need

not be either. Within this view of conversation as structured speech, not necessarily involving face-to-face talking, it is possible to distinguish a number of purposes for conversation in graduate education. Jenlink and Carr (1996) identify four types of conversation with varying degrees of applicability in a graduate setting:

- Conversation as *dialectic* with focus on logical argument and distilling truth.
- Conversation as *discussion* where many people advocate their own individual positions.
- Conversation as *dialogue* with focus on constructing meaning through multiple perspectives.
- Conversation as *design* with goals and a focus on creating something new.

Although these notions of conversation are not void at our school, they have been largely confined to within the campus setting. As IT researchers in a largely brick and mortar academic institution, we looked for ways in which software has been and can be used to bring conversation into the 21st century. In any acceptable solution, stakeholders would have to be more involved in all conversations, both face-to-face and online.

Most prior research about online conversation focuses on problem-solving, decision-making, and discussion depth (Sherry 2000). Although these matters are important, they do not directly address the goals of our project. In a graduate school setting, conversation must extend beyond simple interactions, allowing people to wrestle with complex problems from multiple perspectives. In considering what to do to help our school, we concluded that a more novel approach would be needed to support conversation.

Inspired by outstanding examples of online conversation in a number of very popular online social networking (OSN) applications—including MySpace™, LinkedIn™, and Classmates™—we focused our efforts on the Web 2.0 technologies

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