Managing Online Discussion Forums for Collaborative Learning

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been significant growth in online education (Schrum & Hong, 2002; Evans & Haase, 2001). The number of academic journals devoted to online education also suggests that researchers are paying much attention to advancing online educational methods. One promising area of investigation is collaborative learning, which involves students learning as a group (Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003), much of which takes place electronically without face-to-face interaction (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). One popular tool used to support collaborative learning is the online discussion forum (ODF), which allows asynchronous interaction between participants. This paper describes the experiences of using ODFs for collaborative learning at Universitas 21 Global (U21G), a newly established e-university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A key advantage of ODFs is that they take away the apprehension and embarrassment students often have about contributing to physical face-to-face discussions which can, and often are, dominated by a small number of individuals (Lieblein 2000). ODFs allow individuals to express their ideas in a free manner, providing them with more time for reflection before interacting with others (Hew & Cheung, 2003). The exchange of ideas in an ODF can also support a constructivist approach to learning where students are able to create new knowledge (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). Furthermore, encouraging students to lead and moderate discussion

groups has also been shown to have a positive effect on student participation (Poole, 2000; Corner & Corner, 2003). ODFs therefore potentially serve as an excellent environment for collaborative learning.

There are, of course, some drawbacks to the use of ODFs, one of which is reliance on technology (Pérez Cereijo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001). Poor Internet access can hamper access to ODFs. The usability of ODFs can also be comprised by poor navigation, excessive page loading and refresh times, and the technical design of the ODF. Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) identified comfort with online technologies as one determining factor to a satisfactory online learning experience.

However, making effective use of ODFs for collaborative learning is not simply a technological challenge, but one that involves careful management and facilitation on the part of educators. One challenge is stimulating discussion (Clark, 2001). Providing students with ODF does not necessarily mean students will make use of them. Educators must therefore think about student motivations for using ODFs. Hammond (2000) suggests that the lack of social inclusion in an online environment can also be the cause of non-participation in ODFs. Another issue is the quality of the discussion in an ODF. The number of postings to an ODF does not necessarily correlate well with student learning or effort (Salter 2000). Desanctis, Fayard, Roach, and Jiang (2003) emphasises the importance of deep discussion which involves challenge, reflection and debate, as opposed to surface discussion, which is shallow or repetitive in nature. Students can also struggle to make meaningful contributions to an ODF because of a lack of structure and guidance (Black, 2005).

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

U21G Background

U21G is an e-university established as a joint venture between Universitas 21 (U21), a network of 18 international universities, and Thomson Learning. U21G began offering its first program, the MBA, in July 2003. The typical profile of a U21G MBA student is an individual in their mid-30s, holding a middle management position.

Pedagogy Overview

Programs offered by U21G are delivered entirely online, there is no face-to-face classroom study. Students interact amongst themselves and with professors using a range of Web-based communication tools such as ODFs, e-mail, online chat, and audio conferencing. Students are provided with online courseware specifically designed by U21G containing all the necessary content and resources. Class sections are 12 weeks in duration and class sizes vary between 20 to 35 students. Each class section is led by an adjunct professor.

Use of ODFs for Collaborative Learning

Students are assessed on their participation and performance in collaborative learning activities on the ODFs, which can account for up to 40% of a student's final mark. Although there is some debate around whether ODFs should not be assessed at all, U21G believes that the assessment of ODFs provides a strong motivation for students not only to participate, but to participate to the best of their abilities.

In these collaborative learning activities, there is a strong emphasis on peer learning (Bailey & Luetkehans, 1998). An example of how ODFs are used for collaborative learning is shown in Figure 1.

Here, students are required to download a Harvard business case, ponder over a couple of case questions, and post their answers to the ODF. Such questions are typical of the way ODFs are used for collaborative learning at U21G.

Observed Problems with ODFs

Since the launch of the MBA program, U21G has conducted over 100 class sections. Early on, several problems were observed with the use of ODF for collaborative learning, namely:

Figure 1.

> **Instructions**
> Read and analyze the following case about the Eastman Chemical company and answer the questions that follow.
> Title:
> Constructing an e-Supply Chain at Eastman Chemical Co.
>
> Case No.:
> #HKU222
>
> Date:
> 25 September 2002
>
> Authors:
> Yen, B., Farhoomand, A.F., and Ng, P..
>
> Publisher:
> Harvard Business School case (Field) study
>
> **Questions**
>   1.   What were the key success factors facing Craig Knight in his quest to sell Eastman's approach to e-Business?
>   2.   Describe the risks facing Knight and Eastman in their e-business initiative and suggest what you would have done to reduce or mitigate that risk.
> Post your answer to the questions in a discussion board posting of about 100 words. Alternatively, provide a critique of the postings by at least two of your fellow students. Your critique should further develop points already made, provide alternative perspectives, or introduce new supporting evidence.

Related Content

From Dialogue Games to m-ThinkLets: Overview and Synthesis of a Collaborative Modeling Approach
Stijn Hoppenbrouwersand Wim van Stokkum (2013). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 32-44).*
www.irma-international.org/article/from-dialogue-games-to-m-thinklets/98588

Hypothesis Testing with Confidence Intervals and P Values in PLS-SEM
Ned Kock (2016). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 1-6).*
www.irma-international.org/article/hypothesis-testing-with-confidence-intervals-and-p-values-in-pls-sem/163226

Improving the Performance of Virtual Teams through Team Dynamics
Daphna Shwarts-Asher (2010). *Monitoring and Assessment in Online Collaborative Environments: Emergent Computational Technologies for E-Learning Support (pp. 97-110).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/improving-performance-virtual-teams-through/36845

Urban Sprawl Monitoring Using Remote Sensing and GIS Techniques of the City Jaipur, India
Pushpendra Singh Sisodia, Vivekananda Tiwariand Anil Kumar Dahiya (2018). *E-Planning and Collaboration: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 716-728).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/urban-sprawl-monitoring-using-remote-sensing-and-gis-techniques-of-the-city-jaipur-india/206031

Recognition Method of Sports Training Based on Intelligent Information Platform
Jianhua Bu, Dawei Yaoand Chengmin Wang (2023). *International Journal of e-Collaboration (pp. 1-8).*
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