Chapter XIII

Communication Needs of Online Students

Werner Beuschel
University of Applied Sciences Brandenburg, Germany

Birgit Gaiser
University of Applied Sciences Brandenburg, Germany

Susanne Draheim
University of Applied Sciences Brandenburg, Germany

ABSTRACT

All learning requires a mix of formal and informal communication. As learning shifts from face-to-face to computer-supported environments, explicit support of informal communication is crucial. An assessment of the formal and informal aspects of communication in Web-based learning environments is provided. The current focus on supporting the formal aspects of communication is questioned. The authors hope that this information will further the recognition of organizational and technical support of informal communication in Web-based education as an issue of prime importance.

INTRODUCTION

Students as well as faculty members, tutors, mentors, or administrators, need to communicate to be able to cooperate well. This holds for face-to-face as well as computer-supported learning environments. Web-based learning environments, where computer support is an ubiquitous element allowing access to learning material around the world, the element of computer-mediated communication (CMC) becomes more important, as face-to-face contacts are reduced or absent. While this argument seems obvious, one important aspect is often neglected. As anyone can state from their own experience, learning usually encompasses a mix of formal and informal communication. Beyond the ever-growing

exchange of formal content, like task-related files or data on schedules, the opportunity of informal communication appears increasingly essential for the successful pursuit of online studies.

The value of informal communication seems to be manifold, though not always obvious. It may help students to get a quicker grasp of nonformal requirements during studies, provide opportunities to find fellow students or friends, and, beyond the framework of serious learning, enable contacts to potential partners in pastimes like sports or games. In Web-based learning environments, students and their teachers are usually separated in time and space. Thus, what is lacking is the easy everyday exchange of social cues known from brick-and-mortar institutions and present in traditional environments.

Furthermore, additional technical requirements coming along with Web-based education (WBE) may create frustration if no quick exchange is fostered (cf. Hara & Kling, 1999). Isolation instead of motivation may thus become a hallmark of online classes, impeding successful learning. All these potential deficits are apt to diminish the motivation of online students, thereby endangering online learning success. As a consequence, we plead to put emphasis on support and integration of informal communication in Web-based learning environments.

Though support of communication is a frequent topic in the discussion of learning environments, the focus is generally on their technical aspects (e.g., Communications of the ACM, 1996; Kock et al., 2001; Malaga, 2002). Research on group processes in general, though, provides interesting hints as to our topic. In a recent paper, Cummings et al. investigated the value of online relationships from a social viewpoint (2002). Their findings "… suggest that computer-mediated communication, and in particular email, is less valuable for building and sustaining close social relationships than face-to-face contact and telephone conversations…" (Cummings et al., 2002, p.103). In a similar note, Mortensen and Hinds stated that conflict in groups may increase with physical distance (2001). "Proximity also allows for informal, spontaneous interactions which are either no longer feasible or occur more slowly when teammates are accessible only by email, phone, or videoconference…" (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001, p. 3). They agree with other investigations "…that informal interactions serve to strengthen social ties" (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001, p. 3).

Taken together, the findings in the literature as well as our own experience suggest that communication aspects are generally undervalued in computer-supported learning environments. Thus, to find out more about potential needs for communication support in WBE, we propose to start by questioning the underlying theories and assumptions in order to assess experiences from learning situations. To start with, we provide a short overview of our research background and describe the structure of this chapter.

Research and Project Background

Our research group, named "New Forms of Teaching and Learning," has been exploring organizational, methodological, and technical issues related to computer-supported teaching and learning since 1994, when the group was established. We drew insights from a number of projects, design studies, as well as evaluations and analyses (Beuschel, 1998). Much of the empirical background for the experience presented in this chapter is provided by the German Federal Project "Virtual University of Applied Sciences" (VFH), with which the authors have been involved since its beginning. Within this project, we represent one of a number of research and development groups at 12 German universities. We are trusted with

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