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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a research project in a university social science course. It explores reasons for the emergence of informal peer-to-peer online learning interactivity. Given that the literature on assessment in higher education indicates that learning is driven by assessment, what motivates students to interact online if such activity is not assessed? Data obtained from social science students at Southern Cross University, Australia, over two semesters has shown us that learners' intrinsic motivation can lead to experience of a shared online environment for critical discussion, knowledge building and the establishment of supportive social communities. It emerged from our research that students valued online discussion whether it was assessed or not.

Introduction

Without attempting to debunk the clearly accepted notion that assessment is critical to learning, this paper explores recent evidence that indicates that online interaction has other intrinsic spin-offs for learners whether assessed or not. A research project, conducted with Bachelor of Social Science students at Southern Cross University shows that students can begin to engage personally with their online peers once they have gained experience and have begun to develop a sense of competence and confidence within the computer-mediated learning environment. We refer to a project conducted in 2000/2001, and discuss the emerging outcomes of this project with reference to students' social and motivational experiences in the construction of knowledge online.

Southern Cross University's School of Social and Workplace Development (SaWD) offers an online Bachelor of Social Science to on-campus and off-campus students. A multidisciplinary development team worked to ensure an effective pedagogy underpinned the course design. In terms of 'assessment focus', there is typically a range of options being implemented in SaWD including some online interaction. These include units having no assessable online interaction; those with a compulsory online submission plus encouragement for ongoing interaction; or units with assessable weekly online interaction activities.

Assessment as the Key to Learning

Much has been written which confirms that assessment is the key to learning in traditional settings (Ramsden, 1992). Assessment is also termed the de facto curriculum in distance education contexts (Rowntree, 1977) and the driver of students' approaches to study (Morgan, 1993). Assignments provide learners with opportunities to discover whether or not they understand, if they can perform competently and demonstrate what they've learnt. In this paradigm of learning through assessment, new innovations in teaching and learning such as text-based discussion online, are often incorporated in an assessment scheme to ensure student participation. However, is this truly the key motivator in the online environment? Will students engage in dialogue with each other, if they are not assessed for doing so?

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It is also clear that feedback and grades communicated by assessors to students serve to both teach and motivate (Thorpe, 1998). So, in terms of formative feedback, are students recognising the benefits of non-assessed interaction online for their motivation and learning? Can we use the unique opportunities provided by the online environment to enable students to give and receive constructive feedback on a one-to-one basis rather than relying on the input of academic or student support staff?

What Is Interaction Online and Why Do It?

'Interaction' can be broadly defined as including:
- o learners' interaction with content in terms of their level of critical thinking and critical reasoning skills and,
- o learners' interaction with others in terms of negotiation of meaning and co?construction of knowledge in shared learning environments (Sringam and Greer, 2000, pp.82-3).

Our research initially investigated students' interaction with the content of units and the online environment itself. However, the details reported here relate to our post-hoc examination of participants' reports of interactive communication with peers.

What motivates students to interact with each other online if this activity is not assessed? Recently members of the e-moderators list (see www.eModerators.com) debated whether giving credit is indeed the only way to ensure students engage in web-based discussion. This is reminiscent of Lockwood's work (1992) concerning costs and benefits for open and distance learners when it comes to optional learning activities in print-based study packages. Lockwood's findings were much the same as those reflected in recent comments among e-moderators... that students weigh up what they can afford in terms of 'course?focus', 'self-focus' or 'assignment-focus'. Time and attention to study are allocated in the most pragmatic ways in order to satisfy both intrinsic and extrinsic requirements. What intrinsic motivations will inspire non-assessable interaction online?

Action Learning

We adopted an action learning methodology to course development and continuous improvement, ensuring that online units remain responsive to learners' needs and staff development benefits are maximised through cycles of reflection on practice (Dick, 1997). Initially focussed on an 'action research staff development model' for online design (Ellis & Phelps, 2000), more recently the SaWD focus for action learning has included an investigation of students' responses to the online learning experience. It was considered important to include:

> ...learner representatives in the design process, as they are a group who can verify the effectiveness of the interactive experience in terms of participation, engagement and learning outcomes (Sims, 1999, p.309).

Two online surveys were conducted - late in semester 2, 2000 and early in semester 1, 2001. They included quantitative Likert scale ranking questions and open-ended qualitative questions. The surveys were linked from within the SaWD online units as electronic forms, and students were encouraged to give feedback to be later used to inform improvements to the design of the online learning experience. The aim of our initial research was to understand students' perceptions of features that were aiding or distracting from their learning in the online environment. The outcomes of that project are reported in Newton & Ledgerwood (2001).

All answers were anonymous and teaching staff received combined results for each unit. As part of the reflective action cycle students were also provided with an online summary of the feedback. Improvements were made to both online pedagogy and

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student support between the first and second surveys (Newton & Ledgerwood, 2001). In particular, the first survey showed that the online discussion features were clearly valued, leading us to wonder about decisions students were making to spend time engaged in interaction. Our second survey probed more about the ways in which students chose to use the discussion capabilities in their online units.

Results

It emerged from our study that students' online interactivity provided a peer-to-peer social context for learning beyond that indicated by the extensive literature on importance of assessment and tutor feedback (Thorpe, 1998). On further examination of students' qualitative answers, the online environment apparently offers students opportunities to engage in mutual support and motivation, to enjoy social cohesion among disciplinary peers, and to facilitate a process of meaningful benchmarking.

First Survey (2000)

29 students of 49 enrolled online in SaWD units replied to the survey conducted in Semester 2, 2000, i.e. 60% response rate. 72% indicated they were mature aged (over 25), 76% female. Overall 62% had no previous experience of online modes of study. Questions about online discussion tools showed 55% had little or no experience with asynchronous forums and 72% had little or no experience with synchronous chat.

Second Survey (2001)

The second survey was made available to all SaWD students with access to online units. The potential respondents in this survey included students enrolled online, and those enrolled both externally and internally with online access. This diverse cohort reflects the move towards a mixed mode of delivery at Southern Cross University.

61 students over 14 units replied to the second survey. The response rate appears to be 10% and may be too low to be statistically reliable, however, since the survey was done 4-5 weeks into the Semester, the actual response rate could have been calculated as higher if we had included only those students who stayed involved fully online throughout the course of their study. However, as similar responses were received in both surveys to both quantitative and qualitative questions it is still possible to discuss trends in the use of online discussion by these respondents.

As in Survey 1, participants in Survey 2 were predominantly mature aged (83%), mostly female (73%), studying outside metropolitan areas (67%), inexperienced with online learning (79%), but competent in word processing (97%), email (90%), Web browsers (89%).

Overall, respondents enjoyed their subject with none reporting that they 'Did not enjoy [the subject] at all'. 48% (Survey 1) and 55% (Survey 2) reported that they enjoyed the subject a 'Great' or 'Very Great' amount. There was a high level of satisfaction with the online delivery mode and a preference for online delivery mode (79%, Survey 1) rather than a paper-based off-campus delivery. Only 7% (Survey 1) and 5% (Survey 2) reported they would not take a further online subject.

30% of students reported little or no competence with asynchronous online discussion forums, while 50% said they had little or no competence with synchronous chat, possibly reflecting an increase in skills with online tools among SaWD students.

Interaction: With Whom?

One of the most striking findings in both surveys was the value placed on peer-to-peer interaction. In Survey 1, 82% highly valued peer-to-peer interaction, while 55% highly valued interaction with staff. Similarly, in Survey 2, 58% valued peer-to-peer interaction most highly and 21% valued interaction with staff most highly. This lower rate could be explained by the timing of the second survey early in semester.

Interaction: What is Occurring During Discussion?

Online interaction emerged as important in Survey 1. Following the work of Sringam and Greer (2000), our second survey asked students to make distinctions between their activities within discussion forums at an individual level and interactions in terms of working with other students. This 'work' was not restricted to assessable tasks (see Table 1). See issue's website < http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win01.htm>.

In terms of working with others, we asked students to give an indication of the specific nature of their interactions according to extracts from the Cognitive Development and Interactive Analysis Model (Sringam & Greer, 2000, p.86) (see Table 2).
See issue's website < http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/win01.htm>.

Interaction: Intrinsic Value

Overall there was very positive response to interaction in terms of social support and subject-focused learning support, regardless of whether this discussion was assessed or not. The importance of social interaction was evident, in particular for forming friendships, offering advice, empathy and encouragement to continue studying in this new learning environment. Students who had previously studied via a traditional paper-based distance education mode commented on the value of interaction for overcoming isolation and engaging in mutual support with peers. It was evident in Survey 2 that some students were becoming experienced online students and were developing expectations of a good online learning environment especially for discussion and interaction with peers and lecturers. A sample of comments illustrates the importance of 'social' interaction for students to support their learning.

Value of interacting with peers for shared goals, in a non-competitive situation:
- o   I enjoyed the availability of the tips of other students regarding online tools;
- o   Excellent - everyone seems to use the online connection to work together and there is increased level of support;
- o   I learnt that the trust in our group is a very real part of us doing well.

Social cohesion:
- o   I felt connected as an external student;
- o   I particularly enjoy reading other external students' experiences and backgrounds;
- o   I enjoy reading other readings, thoughts and ideas in the discussion board. Makes me feel a bit more of a student of SCU and less isolated.

Social constructivism:
- o   It opens up new lines of thought and I can see some progress as I go;
- o   I have been an external student for the past four years. Even though I have attained pretty good grades learning on my own, I must admit that I really like on-line experience.

Disciplinary relevance:
- o   The experience has kept me motivated to continue and to get support from other students when I've come across difficult concepts in readings and study guides;
- o   We have formed a group to complete an assignment so we have had a fair bit of group interactivity.

Benchmarking:
- o   I wish I'd had it when I started 2 years ago. The discussion and chance to interact with other students is essential to know I am on the right track, and to get support and help;

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  o We were all feeling the same anxiety about meeting deadlines and subject and assignment material.

Motivation, confidence and making friends:
  o I enjoyed learning when using the discussion board and getting praise for my idea;
  o I think we interact wonderfully well and certainly online friendships are building;
  o When I considered dropping out... my team encouraged me to take time out and they supported me through the worst part of my emotional turmoil.

Interaction: Compulsory Discussion

Respondents disliked learning when there was less interaction with other students than they expected, and when the instructions for use of the discussion forum or unit objectives were not clear. Feedback on assessment tasks also suggested that students did not like too much compulsory assessed discussion that was not structured or moderated, as these became too time consuming and confusing. Assessable online weekly interaction was considered:
  o Too much to do specifically each week.
  o Too many comments to read and take in.

Discussion

We have seen how students are gaining experience as learners in the online environment. Our research with social science students at Southern Cross University has shown that students appreciate the dynamic features of learning online. Without the formal demands of assessment, students who are already comfortable online, have told us that their sense of isolation is minimised, their understanding and emotional responses to learning can be supported in a safe context, and they are easily able to benchmark their progress in relation to their peers.

To stimulate such motivation among online learners we offer the following suggestions:
1. Encourage a non-competitive approach to learning which provides mutual support via online communication:
  -- Acknowledge the importance of peer-to-peer interaction for learning, rather than only valuing the conversational framework as it occurs between student and teacher (Laurillard, 1993);
  -- Establish a safe environment for learning through open communication where mutual and democratic support can be experienced in the building of communities online (Hill & Hall, 2001), and mistakes are celebrated as evidence of learning;
  -- Encourage development and expression of shared goals (Thorpe, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 2000; Hill & Hall, 2001) by helping understanding and summarising agreement, rather than promoting competition in the student group.
2. Facilitate and support social cohesion:
  -- Make the most of the lack of traditional social cues e.g. physical appearances, tone of voice, linguistic habits, accents or impediments etc, so that formation of online networks can be based around mutual valuing of learning goals without the usual distractions (Parry & Dunn, 2000).
3. Support social constructivism:
  -- Enable a positive experience of social construction of knowledge online through encouraging cooperative approaches to the building of understanding, by extension of cognitive skills and examination of a range of viewpoints through exchange of academic and peer support.
4. Consider the disciplinary relevance of discussion:
  -- Create opportunities for students to increase their experience in online discussion and ensure disciplinary relevance of these activities;
  -- Structure discussion according to the nature of discourse in your discipline. Decide on the preferred levels of student autonomy as opposed to facilitation.
5. Create opportunities for benchmarking:
  -- Encourage students to share and reflect their progress and concerns online in order to create an opportunity for personal benchmarking. Where students are remote from each

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other, this benchmarking is highly important, 'fostering deep or meaning approaches to learning in online settings' (Parry & Dunn, 2000, p.227).

6. Actively stimulate motivation, confidence and making new friends:

-- Create areas for non-assessable online discussion to allow the development of confidence in this learning environment;

-- Promote the formation of friendships online for spontaneous sharing of suggestions and hints to handle what can be an unfamiliar environment. This mutual support reveals students' intrinsic motivation for engaging in online discussion and perpetuates such motivation where gains outweigh costs.

Conclusion

Two surveys of social science students at Southern Cross University have helped confirm that online social networks and online knowledge communities are emerging as an extension of our lives offline. Online students are taking advantage of opportunities to form social networks that contribute to their learning process. This process is occurring whether contribution to online discussion is assessed or not.

Groupings of students may be based on enrolment in a subject and a need to complete assessment tasks, but as we have seen, students also choose to share understanding and to support each other in an open unstructured and non-assessed forum. The outcomes of these surveys suggest that deeper social and learning communication networks are also important for online learners.

Gaining confidence and a sense of freedom in an unfamiliar learning environment is important for communication to develop. In an ever more available online context we can expect that students will increasingly see the benefits of staying in-touch with others and proactively shaping their own understanding. In addition, it has been inspiring to see that Jacobson's (1993) hopes for humanising the online environment are gradually coming to fruition, as learners demonstrate civility, conviviality, reciprocity, harmony, edification, artfulness and spirituality, above and beyond the requirements of their assignments.

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