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THE WEB

Collaborative Learning in the Virtual Classroom:

Lessons Learned and a New Set of Tutor Guidelines

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In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of "technology and education" publications, from Computer Assisted Learning (CAL), to the use of multimedia applications in distance education, to the use of the World Wide Web as a resource in the traditional classroom, to the *virtual* learning environment or classroom. Since 1991, when it was released as a component of the larger Internet, the Web has grown greatly as an informal and formal instructional environment, and Web-based instruction is now being offered by an ever-increasing number of institutions all over the world. However, there is little in the literature about the process of creating or adapting a traditional university course to an

online format. In addition, few publications about this topic are *written from the perspective of the tutor who is not a technology expert.*

The Web Came upon Us

In 1998 virtual learning environments were introduced to the university to promote the use of distributed learning in undergraduate courses. Module tutors [i.e., instructors] were encouraged to rewrite modules for this method of teaching and learning. During 1999-2000 we designed and carried out an extensive and ambitious evaluation of the use of virtual learning environments across the university. As part of this evaluation we have described what we learned from the process of developing a series of online courses for the first time, and the opportunities and constraints inherent in the process. This part of the evaluation focuses on one particular element of the virtual classroom—the interactive communication systems that give students the opportunity to communicate and discuss their courses **asynchronously.**

What's There

The various types of asynchronous systems—e-mail, listservs, and conferencing—allow participation from different locales and at times convenient to the individual student. Synchronous tools, such as chat rooms, voice-based teleconferencing, or video conferencing, allow tutors and students to interact at the same time

but from different places. At present no single mode or technology dominates because the availability of equipment varies, as do the goals of various institutions and the teaching styles of individual instructors.

The Experience of It

It has become evident from interviews with students taking part in these modules that their perception and the “reality” of virtual interaction were different from face-to-face traditional classroom interaction. Most such interaction lacked the visual, kinesthetic and sound cues that facilitate communication. Most virtual interaction took place asynchronously where students and instructor posted messages at different times and from different locations. Perhaps as a consequence, it did not have shared sociolinguistic conventions to guide the initiation, development and closure of group discussions. There is little research about the nature of virtual interaction and few models for tutors and students to follow. The following comments show students’ recognition that this form of learning is uncharted territory fraught with new frustrations:

I think [the problems we have been having] are because in this new kind of learning we can’t do the same kind of things that we do in our normal seminars . . . I mean that, in a way, I don’t know what we are supposed to do with it. It seems unnatural that we have to think about what we want to say instead of just saying it. It’s difficult as well to work out what the “tone” of the conversation is. And I feel like I’m letting the world know how good I am.

I don’t like the way you say something and then you have to keep on checking to see if any students or the tutors have responded . . . it’s frustrating. They also seem to drag on a bit with no-one really saying anything useful. . . . another problem is that people keep starting new discussions so it gets disjointed.

After initial analyses of the data collected from interviews, and conversation analysis performed on the actual discussions taking place, we have arrived at two conclusions.

Findings

1. Effective communication is *not happening virtually*, which is leading to fragmentation of a learning community with feelings of isolation and confusion among some students.

2. We need a set of guidelines to help facilitate online discussions.

Planning Guidelines

In an effort to progress through this rather significant problem, we drafted a set of proposed guidelines for “virtual” communication and asked a group of students and tutors to review them and make suggestions for revisions. Frank comments like the following offered genuine help in redrafting our test set:

We have to accept that the dynamics of posting on Lotus are different from the seminar discussions. At the same time, some of us, and I include myself here, need to remember that the courseroom is a discussion, not a chance to wax eloquent. All lecturers, regardless of training, like being in front of the class.

. . . It takes mighty strong medicine to stop us from turning responses into mini lectures.

We are currently test-piloting the following procedural guidelines to see whether, with such a set of guidelines, discussions, and thus students’ experience of online learning, can be improved.

Prerequisite Assumptions

Before a module begins, tutors should be well versed in good practice in courseroom discussions. They should also have their own resource bank of information and guides for students to assist them in their discussions. These may include: good examples of successful courseroom discussions; guidelines for how to read and reflect critically on seminar papers; guide-

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Editor's Note:

Figuring out what's necessary and what's not necessary never proves as easy as we'd like. Take the new technologies and online education, for example. Necessary or "la mode"? Tom Rocklin's TECHPED column will examine this particular example more thoroughly in the next issue of the *Forum*. But Tom's discussion will apply largely to those who still have a choice. In many places, for good or ill, the future arrived yesterday and online learning (or, more precisely, online instruction) is a fact of life. The United Kingdom is one such place. Everyone has heard of the Open University, for example, and its many successes. An instructive shadow side always hovers near success, and online instruction in England has its share of shadows. In their article, "Collaborative Learning in the Virtual Classroom," **Julie Ann Richardson**, of Kings College, London, and **Anthony Turner**, of Canterbury Christ Church University College, report on some disturbing findings about online discussions and offer a set of guidelines for improving the situation.

Mary Bold's cover article, "When Students Feel Stupid," surely deals with an essential element in the teaching and learning dynamic. Feeling stupid doesn't work well as a spur to learning, at least for many of us, and certainly it doesn't encourage an open, energetic classroom. Bold's "don't criticize" will seem weak and wrong-headed to some readers until they learn how students eventually begin to critique themselves. Finding ways to embed assessment in learning rather than have students regard it only as an external judge of learning has been a pedagogical goal of good teachers for a long time. Bold's approach, beginning in something social, seems strongly and importantly linked to something cognitive.

Are courses necessary? Grades? Workshops? **Laura Border's** DEVELOPER'S DIARY column mounts a defense of the workshop as a useful way to get down to cases. Workshops have been maligned in some quarters as light-weight tea parties for those unwilling to read a book and learn the theory. Laura's column reminds us that a lot of learning lies in the doing and that the real value of workshops lies in the fact that they are process-oriented, and refute the old adage that those who can, do, and those who can't, teach.

Teachers teach each other in workshops. They also teach each other over coffee, in chance encounters, in all kinds of situations wherever they come together and talk about teaching. **Craig Nelson's** CARNEGIE CHRONICLE recounts how he learned a number of important things about teaching from colleagues far removed from his discipline (biology). Craig urges readers not only to become familiar with the increasingly sophisticated and research-based writing on teaching and learning, but to contribute to this ongoing inquiry into our common enterprise by reflecting on and writing about their own teaching. There is a growing number of outlets for this work besides *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*. (But a little self-promotion here seems appropriate, don't you think?)

As we exit reviewing the contents of this issue of the *Forum* and the theme of sorting out the necessary from the unnecessary, it's appropriate to note **Linc. Fisch's** AD REM . . . column "On Entrances." Talk all we want about process and content, if we don't start off on the right foot, our instruction may never fall in step with our students' learning.

Wishing us all a productive and satisfying new year (because who knows what happiness is?) . . .

— James Rhem

lines for working effectively as a team.

The Pilot Guidelines

1. Tutors should clearly state (for their own benefit) the purpose of the discussion—asking themselves, How will this discussion help each student to achieve the learning outcomes in terms of skills, knowledge and understanding? They should also be clear in their own minds why the courseroom is the best method of developing these outcomes.
2. Students and tutor should, at the beginning of a module, spend time raising the metacognitive strategy awareness of the participants. (In other words, How is this going to help me . . . ?)
3. Tutors and students should come to mutual understanding and agreement about the style of writing and conventions they will adopt during discussions. This is most effectively achieved during a face-to-face tutorial/seminar.
4. Courseroom discussions should be linked either formally or informally with assessment arrangements, and these expectations should be communicated clearly to students.
5. The tutor clearly states the *minimal* number of postings expected, per student, per discussion.
6. To initiate a discussion, the tutor posts course questions or issues, using concise and clear language. Students respond directly to the question or issue, keeping their responses short and to the point.
7. The tutor models how to facilitate virtual discussions. When students feel comfortable with the new medium, student-led discussion should be encouraged. When using a seminar format, students, individually or in small groups or dyads, are given opportunities to identify critical issues in

the lectures and readings, and lead discussions related to those and other related topics, because (as research shows—Harasim, et al., 1997) active student involvement strategies are an effective way of promoting student critical thinking and interaction.

8. Students should communicate with the tutor via e-mail to make suggestions for discussion topics. The tutor should then use these as (1) an opportunity to take advantage of students' own questions as a starting point, (2) a basis for modeling the skills required to ask effective questions, and (3) a means of building a one-to-one relationship with individual students.
9. The tutor or facilitator should act as moderator of the discussion, guiding individual students if their contributions do not follow the agreed conventions.
10. The tutor or facilitator should continually evaluate the "academic" contributions students are making. For example, is there evidence students are supporting their views with self-study? Is there evidence that students are developing their skills of critically evaluating/responding to assigned texts, as well as each other's contributions? The tutor should use e-mail messages to encourage participation and positively reinforce contributions made.
11. When new or related topics arise during an ongoing discussion, the tutor or facilitator should start a new conversation. Tutors need to decide whether this is best run concurrently or consecutively.
12. The tutor should advise students of the days when she or he will visit the conferencing environment to participate in ongoing discussions, or check on them.
13. Discussions should occur during a specified time frame.

For example, students may have two weeks to participate in ongoing discussions, starting with the date of their first posting. *The conversations are then closed.*

14. Once a discussion is closed tutors should provide feedback to all participants via the courseroom which 1) summarizes the discussion and conclusions made, 2) refers students to further reading, etc., and 3) evaluates the quality of the students' overall contributions. This responsibility could also be given to one or more facilitators.

These guidelines are currently being adopted. All tutors who are involved in the module have been introduced to each of the points above and given opportunities to discuss with each other their most effective implementation.

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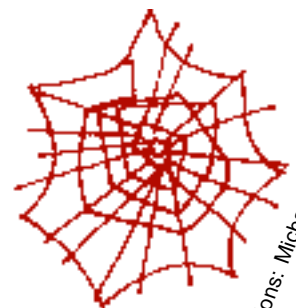
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