Virtual spaces: Delineating the private and public spaces in online discussions

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This paper outlines an effective and pedagogically sound approach to designing the virtual space of an assessable online discussion forum. Through an innovative use of Blackboard's 'Journal' tool I outline how to design a two-phased time-driven virtual forum to scaffold students' learning and to enhance their learning experience. There are pedagogically sound reasons for such an instructional design. In the first private phase, students are provided privacy and freedom to reflect upon, draft and post their own work. This phase potentially assures students that their peers cannot see their work and consequently are not in a position to 'plagiarise' their creative thoughts and ideas. The second public space enables students to read and learn from each others' postings and to participate in further discussions and collaborations. Implicit in this assessment design is the need for the online instructor to intervene twice during the discussion to reset the forum's system switches.

Keyword: online discussion, journal tool, virtual space, private-public phase

Introduction

This paper outlines an effective and pedagogically sound approach to designing online discussion forums especially when they constitute a formal assessment task. The discussion forum, designed using Blackboard's 'Journal' tool, is particularly relevant because its special features permit the virtual forum to be designed as either a 'private' or 'public' space. In a private discussion forum a student's posting can be viewed only by the student concerned and the instructor(s), while in a public discussion all students and instructor(s) assigned to a particular group can view their own, as well as each others', postings. However, as the name suggests, a journal discussion forum is typically intended for quite a different purpose and conventionally therefore limits discussions to be designed as 'private' **or** 'public'. Through personal reflection, past experience and skills, and familiarity with computer technology, I was able to expand upon and transcend the journal tool's restrictive features for use in my own teaching. In this paper I outline what led me to use the journal tool instead of the traditional threaded discussion tool in the discussion forum. I also discuss how I successfully incorporated and executed both private and public features to run in the one discussion forum via a two-phased, time-driven operation. Implicit in this assessment design is the need for the online instructor to intervene twice during the course of the assessment to reset some of the system switches.

There are pedagogically sound reasons for assessable online discussions to incorporate such a two-phased time-driven format. In the first phase, the discussion is designed as a 'private' discussion forum. This private phase provides students the virtual space and freedom to reflect upon, draft and eventually post their work within the set timeframe. Most importantly, it provides students the assurance that other students cannot see their work and are therefore not in a position to 'plagiarise' their creative original thoughts and ideas. Then, in preparation for the second phase of the assessment, the designer manually resets the 'private' settings to enable the forum to now function as a 'public' virtual space. In this public space, students are able to read and learn from each others' postings and to participate in further discussions and collaborations on the topic and experience critical peer-led learning. Such an instructional design is consistent with the assertions made by Northover (2002) that multi-staged discussions are more beneficial that single activity discussions in encouraging deep learning.

Background: online discussion forums

Online discussion forums are a common eLearning feature of many tertiary institutions (Hickman, Bielema & Gunderson 2006; Kanuka 2006; Meyer 2006; Palloff & Pratt 2001). As a pedagogical approach, online discussion forums offer students opportunities for "collaboration as well as increased participation in the learning process, reflection … and extension of the classroom learning" (MacKnight 2000: 38). The online discussion forum is an ideal environment to scaffold students' learning beyond the classroom (Chang, Tarng & Shin 2009; Lee 2008; Salmon 2000: 93). Together these two spaces - the virtual and the physical - make up the blended learning space. However, as cautioned by a number of authors (Kanuka 2006; MacKnight 2000) it is important to consider the design implications of these discussion forums if student learning is to be scaffolded or their learning experience enhanced.

Unlike face-to-face classroom discussions which are in real-time and synchronous, online discussion forums can be designed asynchronously (Ellis 2001; Kanuka 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler 2007; MacKnight 2000; Meyer 2006), "that is, without the need for all participants to be online at the same time" (Littlejohn & Peglar 2007: 25). Thus, a key benefit of the asynchronous discussion forum is that it provides students with flexibility in terms of time (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 53), space and freedom to post their week. An important element of asynchronous discussions is that students are able to engage in a priori learning, i.e. they are able to expend time, thought and effort in formulating their response before posting. For some students this is the preferred option as it allows them to post more grounded and "perfect" (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 51) or "considered" responses (Ellis 2001: 171; Northover 2002) with Northover (2002) even identifying it as one of the clear "[p]ros of discussion boards". Overall therefore, compared to conventional impromptu face-to-face discussions, asynchronous discussions provide students opportunities to participate with greater personal accountability and credibility. A second benefit of online discussion forums is that they provide opportunities for extending or scaffolding students' learning through three different sources: the teacher, through initial face-to-face classroom instruction of the subject matter; the individual student, through further a priori engagement with the topic; and through peers, as a result of the online conversations and discourse and reflective practice that follows. The third benefit is that discussion forums encourage critical thinking (Burgess 2009; MacKnight 2000) and constructive learning (Biggs 2003: 13) as a result of students' own reflection on the discussion topic or when such thoughts are mooted through conversations with their peers. In other words, discussion forums provide excellent opportunities for synergistic learning and knowledge building. The fourth and final benefit of the discussion forum is that it enables students to capture and store the discussions, and to retrieve, review and utilise the information as and when needed (Kanuka 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 50; MacKnight 2000; Northover 2002). Overall, discussion forums provide students better opportunities for deep approaches to learning (Biggs 2003:14; Northover 2002) and a more robust learning experience overall.

However, the benefits of online discussion forums can be lost through inadequate attention to instructional design (Kanuka 2006; Meyer 2006). Meyer (2006) attests that online discussion forums do have their fair share of challenges; she calls on designers to adopt a continual improvement strategy in the design of these discussions. I have used my background in Information Technology and my close to ten years of experience working with various learning management systems in my continuous attempts to improve my online teaching and learning strategies and pedagogy. This paper is based on Cross Cultural Management, an undergraduate unit I have been coordinating and teaching since 2004. I have opted to use blended learning as my preferred teaching pedagogy and one of the eLearning tools that I have consistently used to supplement traditional teaching methods is the online discussion forum. On reflection it is evident that I have embraced Meyer's (2006) advice to course designers to continually work on improving the design of discussion forums to make students' learning and e-learning delivery more effective. In the early years of teaching I relied on threaded discussions, but my experience soon revealed that this tool lacked the capability to address some of the challenges faced by students.

Non-assessable threaded discussion forums

Initially, my weekly online discussions were planned to supplement the conventional lectures and were therefore not designed as compulsory or assessable tasks. Littlejohn and Peglar (2007: 26, 30) identify the 'wrapping' of conventional lectures with a subsequent eLearning component as one form of blended learning. In my own classes many students demonstrated a keenness to take learning out of the classroom and into the virtual space, which was evident in their strong, flowing discussions. One clear observation I made was that the better students were 'pace setters' and would start the ball rolling with discussions that reflected and demonstrated sound critical thinking principles. Other students would engage in dialogue that supported the contributors and some would demonstrate further critical thinking. There was no

'competitive' spirit but rather a shared atmosphere flourished. Furthermore, in such a non-assessable setting, if one student echoed or pinched another's ideas, however original and creative that idea might be, there was no real opposition expressed to such behaviour.

On the other hand, my experience showed a flip side to using non-compulsory or non-assessable discussions to encourage, scaffold, and enhance student learning. Invariably, there would be some students who failed to participate, identified as a common eLearning challenge (Bates 2005; Kanuka 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 59; Northover 2002), or others who would simply echo the comments of others without any attempts to elaborate. Littlejohn and Pegler (2007: 59) refer to this behaviour as 'lurking'; with the student referred to as a "lurker" (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 59; Northover 2002). While such behaviour appears less than satisfactory, Littlejohn and Pegler (2007: 59) caution against drawing decisive conclusions that 'lurkers' are not engaged in deep learning. While in a face-to-face classroom discussion it is possible for the instructor to draw students into a discussion, it is more difficult with asynchronous online discussions because flexibility of the virtual space means that not all students are around at the same time for them to be drawn into such conversations. Littlejohn and Pegler (2007: 58) suggest moderators could email, telephone or personally meet the non-participating students and encourage them to participate, but such options, in my own opinion, are usually not that feasible especially when large classes are involved and tracking time and effort is required. In my own experience, non-participation was a challenge that needed to be managed if student learning was to be scaffolded.

Other problems also surfaced. Despite providing face-to-face sessions as well as documentation, describing how to create a new thread for one's own personal posts and how to reply to a thread to respond to peers' posts, some students invariably mixed up the two types of postings. Such manner of postings can confuse the flow of the discussion logic and reduce students' overall learning process and appreciation of the discussion forum. Another problem was that some students posted their personal posts and/or their responses to the peers' posts in the wrong weekly forums. While it is possible to move the incorrectly posted responses and discussions to the right forums, it is not a feasible option in the long-term.

Assessable threaded discussion forums

As Littlejohn and Pegler (2007: 55) attest, unlike conventional classroom pedagogy, online pedagogy requires "more deliberate planning of activities…scheduling of events and the interplay between them". In an effort to engage and draw all students into constructive dialogue, I incorporated the discussion forum as a compulsory assessable item. Such an approach is consistent with the literature (Ellis 2001; Northover 2002; Salmon 2000: 93) with Swann et al (2007: 2649) providing further evidence that "successful online discussion is directly linked to it being assessed". In my very first attempt at designing the assessable discussion I offered students flexibility by providing them choice of five sets of discussion forums linked to some aspect of the weekly lectures. However, as a way of managing the challenges of cross postings outlined in the previous paragraph, the weekly forums were opened and closed at set times so that only one forum was available for posting at any one time. Students were required to participate in one or more weekly forums by posting their personal reflection on the week's discussion topic, to read as many discussions as possible and to finally engage in discussions of at least two of their peers' entries. At the end of the assessment period they were to self-select and submit their single best personal reflection from their weekly entries and associated discussions for grading purposes. Drawing on MacKnight's (2003) and Meyer's (2006: 121) advice, a key marking criteria used was students' demonstration of creative thinking skills.

This shift in the use of the online discussion forum as an assessment task resulted in newer challenges to manage. There were three fundamental problems. The first was that the vast majority of students did not utilise the 'flexibility' of the choice of the weekly options offered and only participated in the minimum one forum, which in most cases was confined to the final fifth forum. Students who best utilised the 'flexibility' offered by the weekly forums also tended to post early, identified in this paper as 'early posters'. Early posters had their personal entries up on the forum within the first two to three days of a forum opening. The second problem was that the majority of students posted their work in the last thirty minutes or so before the expiration of the weekly deadline. Combining this deduction with the one just stated previously, this in essence meant that the vast majority of postings were in the last thirty minutes of the final fifth forum. Such late attempts at postings can compromise the quality and value of student discussions and collaborations. The third and final problem was voiced by many 'early posters' well into the second week of the weekly forums. Early posters took offence that some late posters were 'plagiarising' their work. Further investigation revealed that students' assertions of 'plagiarism' were more in regards to others 'lifting' their creative original thoughts and ideas rather than directly copying

their statements. This problem has been acknowledged by Northover (2002: 478) who lists "can be difficult to determine 'original' thought" as one of the "[c]ons of discussion boards" Early posters openly expressed dissatisfaction that the design of the online discussion forum allowed other students to 'plagiarise' their ideas. Some dissatisfied early posters attempted to solve the problem by resorting to "dysfunctional behaviour" (Littlejohn & Pegler 2007: 59) in subsequent weekly forums. Instead of posting their work early, like they had done previously, they too resorted to posting their work at the last minute. The implied intention behind this altered behaviour was to deny others any opportunity to 'plagiarise' their original ideas. However, the cumulative effects of students' late posting made the forum ineffective as an online discussion since it hindered effective communication and student discourse and thus hampered opportunities for peer-led learning. These problems set me on a course of reflective practice that culminated in an innovative instructional strategy (Baldwin 2009) of the online discussion forum using the journal feature.

Assessable journal discussion forums

The current format of this two-phased online discussion assessment is the result of many years of personal reflective practice, continuous improvement efforts and incremental changes. In response to students' poor take up of flexibility and choice offered via the multi-week discussion forums, the assessment was designed to consist of a single compulsory two phased time-driven discussion forum. There were two manual resets that were required during the course of the assessment task. The first was required at the end of the private phase to signal the start of the public phase, while the second reset was required at the end of the assessment task to enforce the 'lockout' stage to prevent further postings or comments.

Description of work undertaken
We now turn to describing the actual steps involved in the design and delivery of the assessment. In the Cross Cultural Management unit students enter the unit's eLearning site via the 'Course Content' or Homepage. Within the Homepage were a number of important links, notably the 'Learning Module' link. This link opened up to a new page (see Figure 1) that provided further week by week learning links for students to access relevant material such as announcements, lecture slides, readings, tutorial assignments, instructions and assessments.
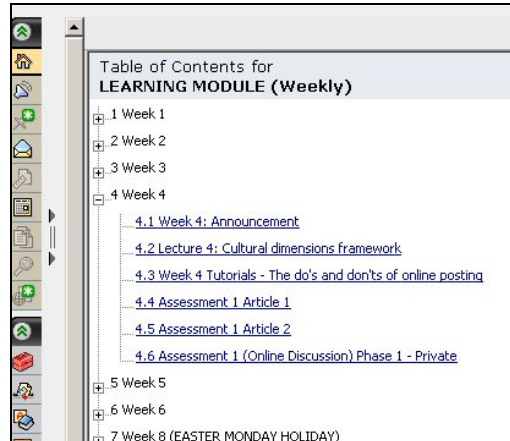

Figure 1: Students access to the 'Online Discussion' assessment

In the first three weeks of lectures, students were introduced to the convergence-divergence-crossvergence (CDC) debate of cultural influence on management. This face-to-face instruction represented the first point of student learning on the on the CDC debate. Although there was some interactive classroom discussion, the large cohort of students meant it was by and large more teacher-led and reminiscent of students as passive learners. Hence, one of the aims of the online discussion assessment task was to encourage all students to be active learners of this important debate.

Students were provided access, via the appropriate Week 4 learning module link, to two articles that provided alternative perspectives of this topic. One of the objectives of the assessment task was to expose students to unconventional views and ideas of the CDC debate and to encourage them to explore the topic beyond the classroom content and discourse. As shown in Figure 2 below, the weekly announcement link instructed students to download, read and critically review the two articles in terms of uncovering 'new' learning regarding the CDC debate.
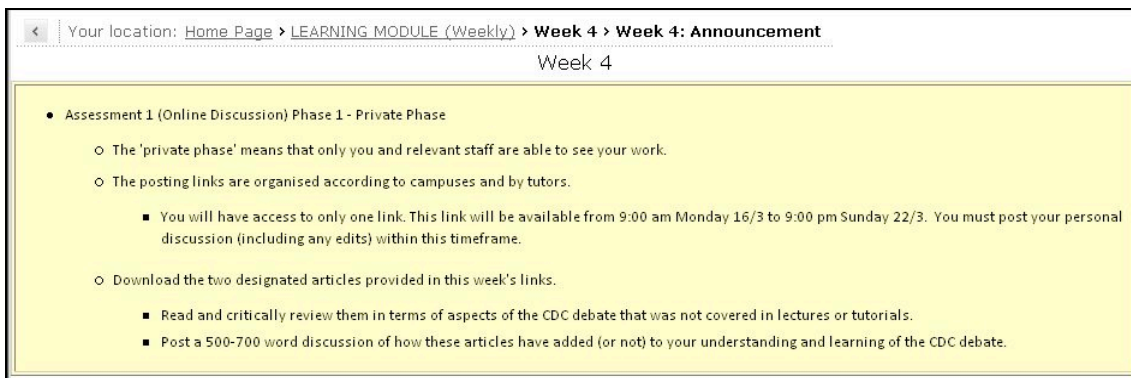
Week 4

- Assessment 1 (Online Discussion) Phase 1 - Private Phase
  - The 'private phase' means that only you and relevant staff are able to see your work.
  - The posting links are organised according to campuses and by tutors.
    - You will have access to only one link. This link will be available from 9:00 am Monday 16/3 to 9:00 pm Sunday 22/3. You must post your personal discussion (including any edits) within this timeframe.
  - Download the two designated articles provided in this week's links.
    - Read and critically review them in terms of aspects of the CDC debate that was not covered in lectures or tutorials.
    - Post a 500-700 word discussion of how these articles have added (or not) to your understanding and learning of the CDC debate.

Figure 2: Announcement to students

This 'new' learning represented the second source of students' learning, i.e. student-centred learning and was aimed at encouraging them to be active learners. In the private phase of the online discussion forum students had the privacy and the freedom to reflect, draft, edit and post their personal critical reviews unencumbered. At the end of the private phase the discussion forum settings were reset to enable the public phase to commence. In this public phase students assigned to a particular forum were able to read each others' postings and to critically review and comment on them, in terms of uncovering and/or contesting new learning of the CDC debate. This third source of students' learning of the CDC debate represented peer-led learning. Overall, this assessment had the potential to scaffold student learning of the CDC debate through three different sources of knowledge – the lecturer, the student and peers.

Instructional design: Online delivery
Unlike traditional paper-based assessments, online assessments need the designer to present students with further instructional steps on how to go about executing the assessment task (Kanuka 2006; Littlejohn & Pegler 2007). This means that the lecturer, besides being the content-expert (Kanuka 2006), must also either personally or with the help of other instructional designers, plan how the assessment will be executed online. As mentioned in the introduction, my previous experience in IT meant that I was effectively able to be both content- and instructional design expert. This section discusses the key online operational tasks that I undertook.

Organise students online
The first design task was to organise students for the discussion forum. To effectively manage and monitor the online discussion forums it is important that students, especially in the case of a large cohort, are split into smaller, more manageable groups using select parameters. In this unit there were 280 students and I opted for five discussion groups. In 'teach' tab mode, I used the 'Group Manager' 'Instructor Tools' function (left pane) to organise students into five discussion groups (see Figure 3 on the following page). Typically, there was an average of 55 students in each group. It was through their membership in one of these groups that a student ultimately gained access to their online discussion forum.
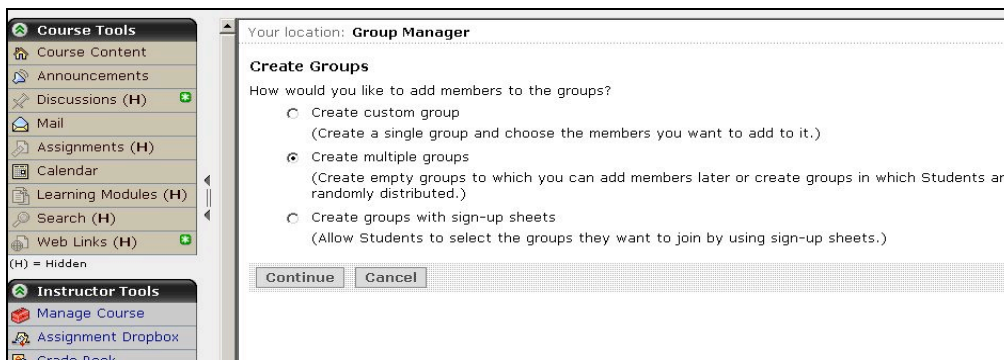
Figure 3: Create student groups

Design the journal topic discussion
The second design task was to create the discussion forum. This was done using the 'Teach' tab mode. The 'Discussions' course tool (left pane) was used to first create a journal discussion category titled, 'Assessment 1 (Online Discussion) Phase 1 – Private'. A suitable narrative was provided in the category's

description box to inform students as to what was required of them. Next, the 'create topic' tab was used to open five sets of 'journal topic', one discussion forum each for the five previously created student groups. The forums were appropriately named for easy identification by students, and were all placed within the broader journal discussion category created earlier as shown in Figure 4.
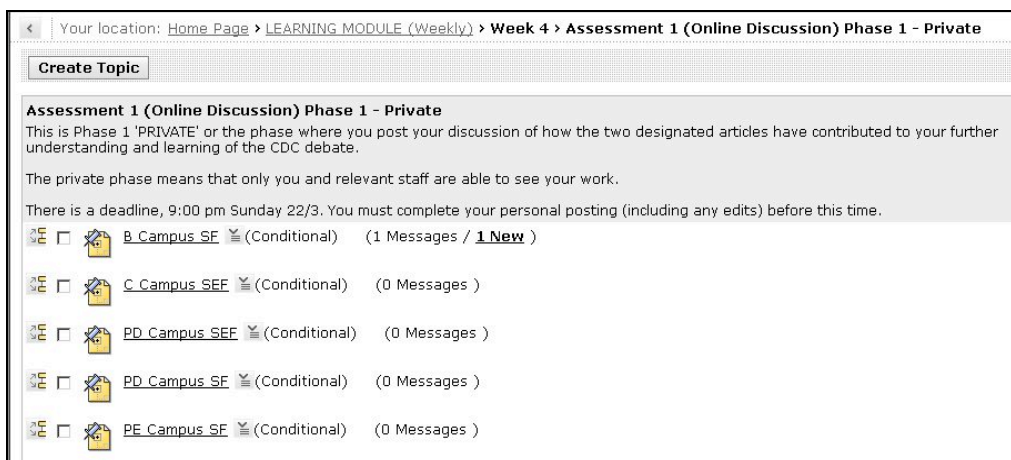

Figure 4: Create discussion forums for all student groups

As each journal topic was created the following identical parameters were set in the "topic behaviour options" (see Figure 5):

1. 'Student Posting Rules' - 'Students can post messages but cannot reply to messages' and 'Students can edit their messages after posting them'
2. 'Author Identification' – 'Authors are identified by user names' and
3. 'Journal Privacy' – 'Private: entries are visible to the author and Section Instructors only'
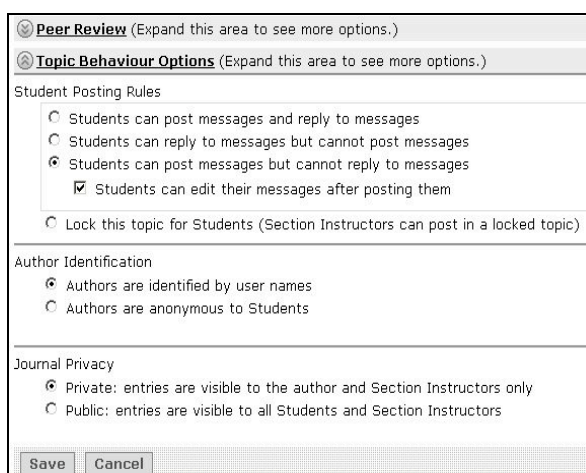
Figure 5: Topic behaviour options

Set selective release parameters for the private phase
The third design task was to set the conditions for the private phase for each of discussion forum. Again, this is best done in 'Teach' tab mode. Once again, the 'Discussions' course tool was used to configure each one of the five discussion forums by setting the following parameters in the 'Set Release Criteria':

i) 'Add Date Criteria' - the 'Available Starting' was set at 9:00 am Monday 16/3 and the 'Available Until' was set at 9:00pm Sunday 22/3.
ii) 'Add Group Criteria' – the pre-assigned group was linked to their specific discussion group.

Create the link on 'Learning Module'
As mentioned previously, students accessed their weekly material via the 'Learning Module' link on the Homepage. Hence, the fourth and final design task was to link the discussion category 'Assessment 1 (Online Discussion) Phase 1 – Private' to the week 4 learning module.

The assessment in operation

At 9:00 am Monday on the 16th March 2009, the assessment became 'live' as a Week 4 learning module link. This meant that each and every student could see and access only the specific forum they were assigned to, to post their critical review in private as shown in Figure 6. Within their designated discussion forum, students used the 'Create New Entry' tab (see Figure 7) to post their work..
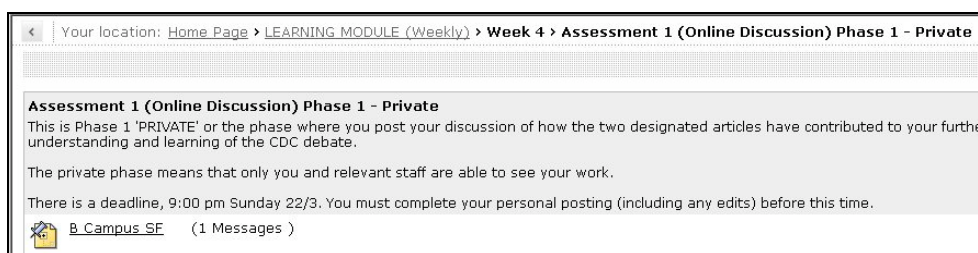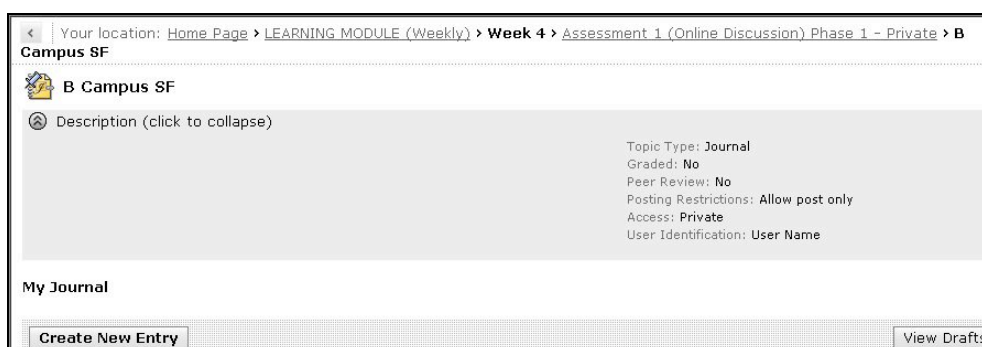

Figure 6: Sample student's view of the private discussion site

Figure 7: Sample student's 'create new entry' private post

The system settings also allowed students to re-edit (see 'Edit Message' in Figure 8) and re-post their previously posted entry any number of times before the stated deadline.
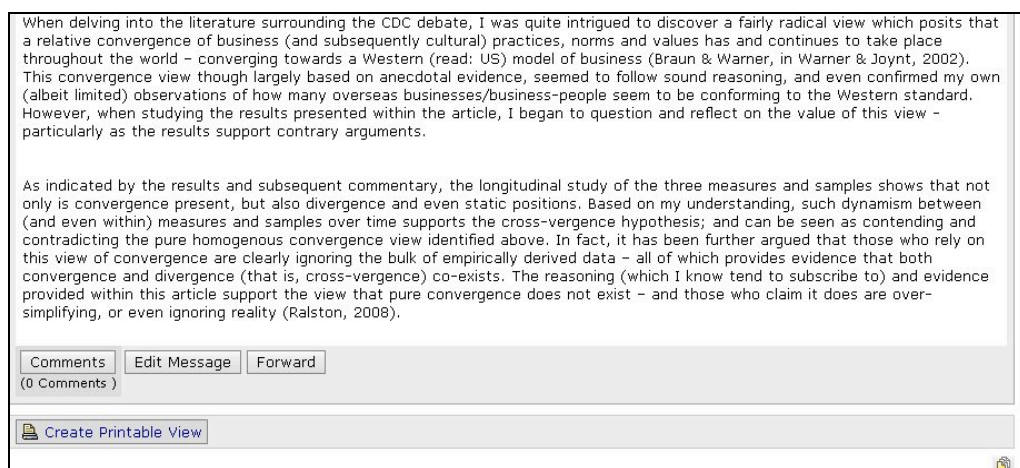
Figure 8: Sample student's re-edit view in private discussion phase

First manual intervention
At 9:00 pm Sunday 22/3 students no longer had access to their Week 4 learning module 'Assessment 1 (Online Discussion) Phase 1 – Private' link. Sometime after this, but before 9:00am Monday 23/3, the online designer had to perform the first set of manual interventions to enable students to have access to the public phase of their assessment via an appropriately titled Week 5 learning module link.

There were three steps involved in resetting the system settings. First, in 'Build' tab mode, the week 4 discussion category was moved to week 5 and then renamed as 'Assessment 1 (Online Discussion) Phase 2 – Public' (see sample site in Figure 9) The category and forum descriptions were edited to include a proper narrative of what students were required to do in this public phase.

Figure 9: Students' access to the public phase

Second, switching to 'Teach' tab mode, the "topic behaviour options" (see Figure 5) for all discussion topics were reset as follows:

i) 'Student Posting Rules' - 'Students can reply to messages but cannot post messages'
ii) 'Journal Privacy' – 'Public: entries are visible to all students and Section Instructors'

Third, the 'Set Release Criteria' was reset to accommodate the new deadline by editing the 'Available Until' date to 9:00 pm Sunday 29/3.

These changes effectively provided students a week to read, reflect on and select two of their peers' postings that further contributed to their own learning of the CDC debate (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: The discussion forum in the public phase

Students were instructed to comment on both these postings by using the 'Comment' tab in their own individual posting. Hence, each student's journal posting would comprise their own critical review as well as two clearly identified entries (comments) of their peers' works. This decision to post comments within each student's own journal and not as part of their peers' journal was a strategic move to reduce the number of pages that students would have to ultimately print. By posting comments in their own journal posting, students had to print only their own journal instead of three sets of journal postings (theirs, and two of their peers).

Second manual intervention
At 9:00 am Monday 30/3 the online designer, in 'Teach' tab mode, reset the "topic behaviour options" (see Figure 5) for all discussion topics by setting the 'Student Posting Rules' indicator to 'Lock this topic for Students (Section Instructors can post in a locked topic)'. Next, the 'Set Release Criteria' was edited to reset the 'Available Until' option to 'Unlimited'. These two changes effectively disabled students from any further posting but at the same time permitted them access to the site for printing purposes.

Discussion

Overall, students' experiences with the new design format of the assessable online discussion forum had been very positive. Two key outcomes were evident. First, the design of the private/public phase ensured that early posters' personal critical reflections were clearly protected. This protection made the ownership of unique and excellent critical thoughts easily identifiable and students could be duly rewarded using the relevant assessment marking criteria. Second, the format ensured all students posted their personal critical reflections by the end of the private phase. Therefore, unlike typical online discussions where there is a flurry of postings/comments just before the deadline, the new design ensured a clearly defined period for students to post and another period for them to read as many students' postings as they desired and to then select and comment on those that had further contributed to their understanding of the CDC debate. Hence, the assessment design encouraged scaffolding of learning and ensured that all students had the opportunity to be active learners.

In retrospect, a limitation of the present design was that the discussion groups, at an average of 55 students, were difficult to track and manage. A key disadvantage of the journal feature is that it lists, on the left-hand pane, names of all members who have entered a discussion site but does not in any way indicate whether the member has posted or not. It thus proved an arduous task to open, track and manage a group as large as 55 members, to see who has posted and who did not. In future I would organise the groups according to the tutorial classes, and since these are typically smaller groups, the logistics of monitoring, tracking and identifying late posters would be much easier and corrective steps can be more easily initiated.

Conclusion

Baldwin's (2009: 15) advises that "[p]rofessors who experiment with educational improvements in their classrooms and share their experience and outcomes with colleagues help to develop a culture of improvement in their departments and institutions". My teaching experience has shown that when online discussions are part of formal assessments students not only want the space and privacy to work on their own postings, but also want the space and the platform to engage with fellow students. In this paper I demonstrated an innovative instructional design strategy that involved the use of Blackboard's Journal tool to create a discussion forum that fulfilled both these needs.

Working around the Journal tool's inherent system limitations that facilitate the creation of either a 'private' or 'public' online discussion forum, I demonstrated how it is possible to incorporate both spaces into the one discussion forum. Pedagogically, this design worked out as an effective teaching and learning strategy in that it provided for the scaffolding of student learning and enhancing their learning experience. The design strategy involved splitting the online discussion into two time-driven and dependent phases, starting with a private phase and culminating in a public phase. Implicit in the design of this strategy was the need for the online designer to undertake two essential manipulations of the systems setting. The first involved switching the forum settings at the end of the private phase to initiate the start of the public phase, and the second involved 'locking' the forum at the end of the public phase so as to prevent further postings by students.

In conclusion, in line with Baldwin's (2009: 16) call to academics to meet regularly and share their teaching and learning experience I have shared this design strategy with fellow staff and a few have adopted the model successfully. I now wish to share this experience with the wider community of teaching and learning practitioners. The blended learning environment is a contemporary reality; but just as students want, need and have public and private learning spheres in their physical space, they similarly want and need such spheres in their virtual space.

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