Encouraging effective online discussions - a description of an evolving C^{2}MP project

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Although online discussion forums are considered an integral component of online learning in our College, the practice of how these are currently used does not always reflect the intended learning design. Discussions are often focussed on processes and administrative nature, rather than discussion about content. The aim of the project is to improve this usage, to include more in-depth and content-related discussions. The stages of the project and expected outcomes are explained.

Keywords: Effective online discussions; facilitator presence; online learning; staff development

Introduction

The aim of the project, the first stage of which is being carried out as part of the ascilite Collaborative Community Mentoring Program(C^{2}MP) (ascilite, 2011), is to improve usage of discussion forums, to include more in-depth and content-related discussions. Whilst the context of the project is in a small privately owned college, the results will be of interest to all institutions and staff who have a desire to engage their students in meaningful dialaogue.

Rationale and context

Anecdotal evidence from educators and some preliminary investigations current usage of online discussion forums in a small privately owned tertiary college (Australian College of Applied Psychology- ACAP)
suggest that there is very little deep discussion about content in the online classroom for our units. Most discussion is about process focussing on administrative questions rather than being about content, and there is little evidence of engagement of students.

Whilst offering full tertiary degree and Masters programs our College is unique and structured slightly differently to a university, presenting different challenges and opportunities for learning and teaching support. We offer fully online, as well as on-campus, units and courses and our cohort is more mature-age students than those straight from high school, and many are studying part-time after many years away from school. Classes, which always have less than twenty students, are facilitated by part-time educators who are usually practitioners with some teaching experience. ACAP currently offers the Bachelor of Applied Social Science by flexible delivery, as well as on-campus. In flexible delivery, units are completed fully online, utilising Moodle as the

Learning Management System. Students also complete two practicum subjects and attend three face-to-face Counsellor Development Workshops, if completing the Counselling specialisation. Online discussions are an integral component of online learning in the ACAP context, including educator announcements, general forums and forums for discussion on specific learning activities.

The aim of the project is to improve this usage, to include more in-depth and content-related discussions. The project will research current usage of discussion forums as well as good practices and strategies that can be implemented to improve students' engagement with content, educator and each other.

Methodology

This project will be based on design-based research (Wang & Hannafin, 2005) and will work through the following stages
- identify an issue – ineffective use of online discussion forums
- evaluate current usage – this will include evaluation of usage logs and analysis of types of discussions currently occurring.
- analyse the problem – what are the issues – these include:- educators not aware of institutional expectations; educators not meeting institutional expectations of online presence; lack of educational awareness of how to facilitate effective online discussions; students unaware of how to effectively participate in online discussions; students not aware of expectations of participation expectations and students are independent learners who do not wish to participate in online discussions.
- develop and conduct surveys of educator and student perceptions.
- suggest possible courses of action – these may include:-more explicit guidelines for participation prepared for educators and students; a range of professional development opportunities provided for educators;
    - orientation sessions and training provided for students in how and why to participate in online discussions
- research literature to find examples of good practice and evidence for why and how these work
- develop an action plan – this will be based on the most appropriate and sustainable options identified from the literature review
- evaluate effectiveness of actions
- redevelop and redesign as needed

Literature review

A detailed review of literature will be undertaken to try and determine responses to a range of questions including the issues of evidence of the effectiveness of online discussions; best practice in facilitating online dicsussions; the factors that lead to effective online discussions
I will also draw on the expertise of my mentors and other participants in the C^2MP to formulate these responses.

Expected outcomes

Whilst this project is still in its infancy, and will continue well beyond the scope of the C^2MP there are some main deliverables that I envisage will come from this project including

- changes to ways in which discussion forums are incorporated into the online class spoace and promoted to studnets and educators
- support materials for students and Educators, including setting and communicating expectations
- professional development workshops and other resources for Educators

In addition there are a number of perceived benefits for ACAP including

- improved student learning and satisfaction
- improved student retention rates
- improved appreciation of the value of online discussions for educators

References

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    http://ascilite.org.au/index.php?p=community_mentoring_programme [viewed 16 Jul 2011]
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