Feeling the Feed: Migrating from Threaded Discussions to Social Media

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This poster describes the ongoing challenges of using now 'traditional' threaded discussion boards, and details events leading to a simultaneous design experiment conducting an instructional activity in the traditional threaded discussion and a social media platform. It further describes a trial abandoning the legacy threaded discussion application completely in favor of the social media platform.

Keywords: social media, social presence, threaded discussions, online learning & teaching

Short History of Emergent Tools for Online Learning Communities

Threaded discussion boards (DBs) are a proven structure upon which to organise online community conversations along lines of content or learning objectives and are also useful for providing a repository which supports interactions and knowledge sharing. ASCII Bulletin boards predated the Learning Management System (LMS) (Greenlaw & Hepp, 1999). From there the Internet expanded to Web 1.0 including online learning systems,including for higher education (HE). In HE, LMS confined discussion boards became the engine room of online learning engagement. (Horton, 2000; Salmon, 2011). LMS DBs are not universally embraced. Many lecturers complain "they built it and no one came." Making DB participation an assessment item has been integrated by LMS vendors but engagement may be compliant and shallow. Orthodoxy about what instructional/learning design practices instigated within DBs has also emerged (Salmon, 2011; Goodyear and Zenios, 2007). Social presence and teaching presence has also been discussed (Lynch 2002, Schutt, 2008.). Other related themes to have been discussed include teaching team participation (Tseng, Wang, Ku & Sun, 2009) and interaction with students (Novais, Ramos, Nappo & Sigule 2010), modeling of desired academic communication styles and presentation of exemplary curricular artifacts (Morgan, Cameron & Williams, 2009). Not all DB innovations by LMS vendors have improved upon using simple threads which highlight newer posts, although there are improvements such as location of DB within learning paths, and Web 2.0 "rich user experience" (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 34) features. Asynchronous post of audio and video files can also be done. Currently, asynchronicity as provided by DBs may be losing prominence in respect to synchronicity in the context of multi-tasking (Klingberg, 2009). Even real time scheduled learning episodes through virtual meeting are losing to continuous narrative . Structuring of connversations and meaning is no longer the prime requirement as users are simultaneously immersed in multiple continuous feeds in which they have an interest, or at least, are interested, in. Social media is now ubiquitously apparent (Rainey & Wellman, 2012) but has had spottier penetration into the higher education space., As with all technologies introduced to teaching, sparse numbers of early adopters of blog platforms, twitter and Facebook applied to teaching and learning are in evidence (Rutherford, 2010). YouTube is used in face to face lectures. (Bonk, 2008) Universities have employed marketing professionals who have included social within marketing mix (Alkas, 2011).

Simultaneous use Social Media vs. Threaded Discussion Board

In a totally online offering of the Comparative Management Open Universities Australia unit with an enrolment of 240 students at the start, a conventional threaded discussion board strategy was built into the LMS site, with threads for support and queries about assessment, as well as a separate thread envisioned for each of the 6 modules comprising the unit headings where possible. Participation was minimal, as exemplified by the statistics provided in Table 1 for the Exemplar assignment criteria activity in Table 1.

Table 1: Postings and Participants on threaded forum preparing for Written Assessment task

Thread	Threaded Forum Posts/Participants (non-instructor)
Exemplar Paper	14/7
Criterion 1 Comparative Technique: Uses both cases to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and analytical skill	0/0
Criterion 2 Command of relevant concepts and facts for each case, including culture	2/2
Criterion 3 Managerial Insights: Reflection and application	3/2
Criterion 4 Written Communication: Language, structure, and scholarship	0/0

This activity was meant to be a high quality interactive experience in preparing for the major written assessment task based on practice in interpreting assessment criteria (Race, 2007) and social constructivist discourse between teachers and students concerning those criteria (Rust, O'Donovan & Price, 2010). An exemplar paper was created and attached to the main thread. Then, each of the four criteria contained for marking were posted as separate threads. Students were encouraged to read the exemplar paper (which by design had some strong and weak performances on different criteria) and post their opinion as to what performance level they thought was achieved and perhaps why they assigned it that mark. Then in keeping up with practice of reality media, there would be a 'big reveal' of the actual mark from the instructor as soon as 50 votes were recorded. In an attempt to garner more participation before the assessment was due, the same activity was run concurrently using Yammer (2012). Figure 1 shows screenshots.
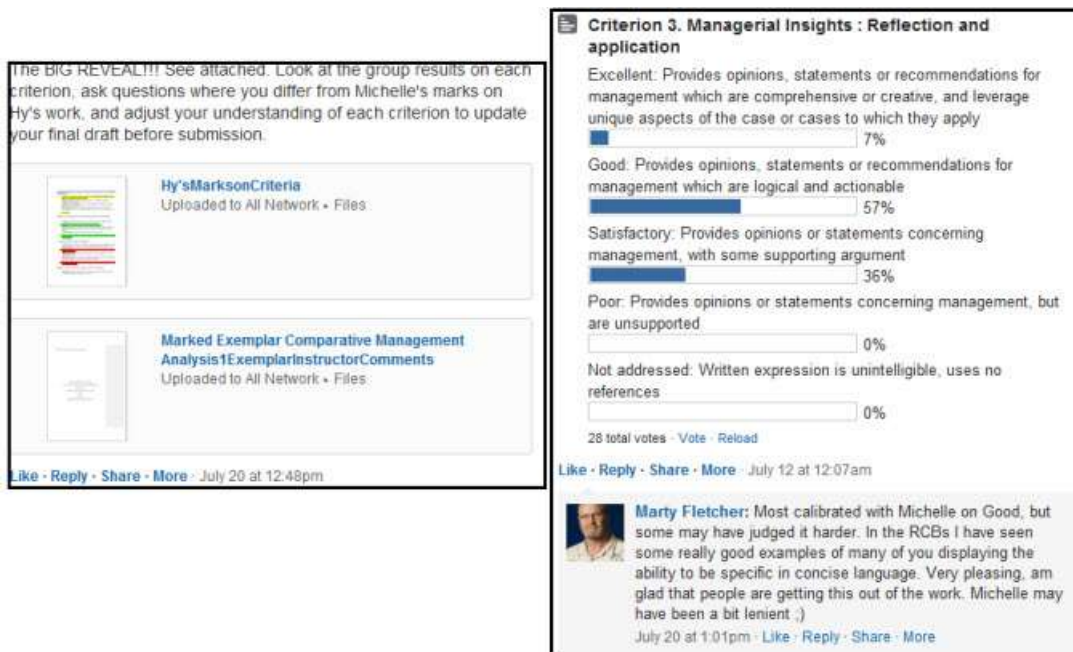

Figure 1: Exemplar Discussion Exercise in Yammer

Results were that, within one week after setting this up, there were additional 28 votes on each of the criteria, and some discourse (Rust et.al) on elaborating on the required qualities of achievement and their rationale. Although 2 students expressed preference for the discussion forum and only addition there were many positive comments about Yammer for instance of preference for its Facebook-like interface over the LMS discussion page set up. A number of students advised that they were already on Yammer in their workplaces. Total number of network members in this short window of time peaked at 101. From an instructor point of view, it was noticed that maintaining awareness and accessing the platform to see the interactions was much more fluid and could be done in much less time than required to monitor the discussion forum. Based upon the experience of using both the discussion forum and Yammer platform side by side, it was decided that in the following study period which is currently underway, Yammer would be used exclusively for discussion activities.

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