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BUILDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES: THE LECTURER'S ROLE IN FACILITATING INTERACTION AMONG NON-COMPUTER ORIENTED, MATURE-AGE ADULT LEARNERS.

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Abstract

With the significant growth of online learning in Australian universities, there is need to examine the pedagogy of online learning, particularly from the perspective of the lecturer. Comparing the online strategies used in a postgraduate course on educational leadership of change with a core, undergraduate teacher education course, focusing on issues of sociology, this paper examines the impact on the lecturer and the students of distance learning courses in which a significant proportion of online interaction was mandatory. The following questions provided the focus for this paper; "In what ways can lecturers facilitate greater interaction in the online environment? Can an online community be established among non-computer oriented, mature age adult learners?"

Keywords

Online interaction. Pedagogy. Role of the lecturer. Authentic experiences

Introduction

With the considerable growth in online education in Australian universities, three key issues require further research; cost effectiveness, quality and pedagogy (Beck et. al., 2002). This paper focuses on the pedagogy of online education, particularly in terms of the input of the lecturer, as anecdotal evidence suggests that "...instructor performance in the online discussion portion of online courses has a major impact on learning and learner satisfaction (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003, p,149). Further, as use of authentic experiences are important success factors in online learning (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003, p.68), student response to these types of online tasks will be explored. This paper is an initial report of research-in-progress that explores the role of the lecturer as designer of, and facilitator for, online interaction with mature age, non-computer oriented adult learners in teacher education programs. Two questions, "In what ways can an online lecturer facilitate greater interaction in the online environment? Can an online community be established among non-computer oriented, mature age adult learners?" guided this exploratory study.

The context

Two very different groups of mature-age students undertaking distance learning courses, in which Blackboard was used as the online management system, were the focus of this study. The major difference related to their teaching experience. The first group, undertaking a 14 week postgraduate course in "Leading Educational Change" as part of a Master's degree program 'Leading and Managing in Education', consisted of 16 senior teachers and educational leaders, working in school contexts across

Australia and South East Asia. The second group had no teaching experience and were undertaking their second semester course during a concentrated summer school semester. Enrolled in an accelerated secondary teacher education program, they would graduate in 18 months as qualified teachers of Design and Technology, Mathematics or Computing Studies, to meet the demand for specialized secondary teachers. Although they had no prior teaching experience, these 54 mature-age students had considerable industry and commercial experience, with previous occupations as diverse as train driver, engineer, TAFE teacher, plumber, electrician, boilermaker, public servant, hospitality manager, metallurgist, printer, auto electrician, marine engineer and department store manager. Surveys at the beginning of both courses revealed that only five of the postgraduate students had any previous online experiences while all the undergraduate students had used Blackboard in one course the previous semester. However, this experience had not been positive due to their unfamiliarity with computers and their apprehension about lack of face-to-face interaction.

Course design

The lecturer re-designed both courses, which had used either distance education strategies, such as printed course outlines and printed books of readings, or face-to-face interaction, to focus on use of Blackboard to disseminate announcements, provide supplementary resources online and to provide access to online lecture material, for example, Powerpoint presentations. More importantly, Blackboard provided for electronic lecturer-to-student and student-to-student interaction as well as providing the means for submitting assignments electronically, either to share publicly online or to submit privately to the lecturer. Assignments were designed to critically analyse authentic experiences, either through use of simulations or real life scenarios, or through action research of workplace issues. However, the two courses differed in that the undergraduate course was highly structured with clearly defined online tasks with tight time frames whereas the postgraduate course was more flexible in how online tasks were to be undertaken.

Strategies used in increase involvement

In the postgraduate course, strategies used to increase online interaction included: (a) three mandatory online assignments; (b) specific discussion forums based around online articles and issues of change; (c) links with a postgraduate leadership course in a mid-Western university in USA to experience a cross cultural perspective online and produce a short, collaborative, online assignment; and, (e) a culminating assignment to critically assess the change to online interaction.

In the undergraduate course strategies were more structured and included use of: (a) online workgroups of six people, each from a different background, to analyse tasks during the two phases of operation of the 10 week summer school; (b) specific roles were given to each member of the workgroup and rotated for each phase; and, (c) tightly sequenced activities with structured requirements expected from the ‘Starter’, ‘Wrapper’ and ‘Assessor’ in each online group.

Strategies common to both courses included: (a) use authentic experiences as the basis for assignments. For example, the post graduate students posted critical reflections on their educational change issues to which their peers responded. The undergraduate students, in their online groups, generated a Ministerial response to a letter from a member of the P&C and prepared recommendations, for the principal of their simulated school, for dealing with social inequity; (b) distribution of printed packages, consisting of course outline and readings, either via the post or during a compulsory face-to-face session at the beginning of the summer school; (c) mandatory online interaction (30% for the postgraduate course, 100% for undergraduate); (d) use of an ‘introduction’ forum in that the first online activity required each participant to introduce themselves through a brief overview of their professional responsibilities and to make brief comment about themselves such as a favourite colour, movie, song etc; (e) an informal discussion forum called “Café Latte”; (f) daily monitoring and frequent contribution to postings by the lecturer; (g) use of online work groups - although the formation of the groups was structured differently; and (h) an assessable reflective assignment in which students critically examined their involvement in online interaction.

Data gathering

Considerable online data were examined in this exploratory study. First, informal surveys of prior online experiences and attitudes towards online learning were administered at the beginning of each course. Second, Blackboard provided data on 'hits' to the site which could be displayed according to type, date, time of day and frequency for each participant. Although only useful as a crude indicator, these data allowed for initial comparisons between individuals. Third, all online postings were grouped by date, author and subject and archived for content analysis. A rubric to encourage and assess student engagement in online course conferences (Roblyer, 2002) was used to assess and grade online contributions by giving marks for frequency, timeliness, type and quality of postings to indicate 'low', 'moderate' or 'high' levels of engagement. Fourth, all individual and group online assignments were stored and retrieved for analysis. Initial qualitative analysis of postings and online assignments was undertaken by 'copying and pasting' key quotations from each person's work according to categories such as positive or negative feedback, examples of personal learning, perceptions on the use of online groups and illustrations of personal learning as a result of the online experience. Fifth, both groups completed a final, individual assignment which required critical reflection about their online experience. A scenario, based around meeting friends in a coffee shop, provided a setting in which each student could respond to questions about the advantages and disadvantages of the online experience, working in groups online, and give a critical analysis of their own personal learning experience though interacting online. Finally, at the end of the course, an online survey of 14 multiple choice items sought feedback on various elements of online interaction such as difficulty, usefulness, and student learning as well as ratings of the instructor's input in terms of enthusiasm, openness to student opinion and ability to moderate discussions. In addition, short statements were sought on the best aspects of the course and ways of improving the course.

Results

The major finding was that these strategies resulted in considerably more online interaction than in previous distance learning courses with an online component. At a quantitative level the 'statistics' section of Blackboard showed that the number of hits per student for the undergraduate summer school course ranged from 355 to 4,300 with most of the 54 students in the 1,500 to 2,500 range. In the postgraduate course the number of hits ranged from 640 to 3706 for the 16 participants with the Instructor recording 4,335 hits over the semester-long course. In terms of actual postings the postgraduate course on change resulted in 11 discussion forums that generated 890 postings with most postings containing between 50 - 200 words with an average of 56 postings per student per semester. This was in a course in which only 30% of the assessment was online!

Daily input by the Instructor, particularly in the undergraduate course resulted in 6,554 hits prompting comments such as *"... we had a tutor who as on the ball almost 25 hours per day ... the ink was hardly dry and he would have his reply posted" and "I am sure the man has no social life as he seems to be on the computer 24 hours a day, 7 days per week!"*

The initial surveys demonstrated that both groups of mature-age students were apprehensive about participating online. Most claimed that they were not confident with computers and regarded online interaction as threatening because it was so different from their previous face-to-face experiences. The culminating online survey and responses to the coffee shop scenario demonstrated a marked change towards seeing online interaction as a valuable learning experience in which factors such as greater flexibility outweighed the need for regular face-to-face interaction.

Discussion

Preliminary analysis of the data reveals that strategies such as generating a variety of online discussion forums, forming online groups, compulsory online contribution, frequent and regular monitoring and contribution by the lecturer, and use of authentic, real-life tasks contributed to considerably more online

interaction than in previous courses and indicated that an online community could be developed in which there was frequent interaction.

From initial content analysis of postings many students in both courses had gone beyond online socialization (Stage 2) and information exchange (Stage 3) in their online group activities and were experiencing knowledge construction (Stage 4), as described in Salmon's (2000) e-moderating scale. Assignments indicated that many were engaging in some "... very active learning, especially through widening their own viewpoints and appreciating differing perspectives" (Salmon, 2000, p.32). Preliminary analysis using the Roblyer rubric (2002) for the undergraduate course indicated that there was an even spread across the 'low', 'moderate' and 'high' categories whereas the postgraduate engagement tended to focus on the 'moderate' level with approximately one third in the 'high' engagement category. Data analysis revealed a growing appreciation of the increased flexibility for learning offered by an online environment. Importantly, student comment indicated that through frequent use of online interaction, initial apprehension about use of information and communication technologies (ICT) had decreased markedly as they read about others in their class with similar concerns and realized that their concerns about using computers for online interaction were unwarranted.

Results from the final online survey demonstrated that adult learning strategies such as discussion, debate, self directed learning, and flexible contracts, were positively regarded and highly valued as authentic activities, in that they were seen as of real world relevance, collaborative, provided for reflection and were linked to assessment (Herrington et. al., 2003, p. 62).

However, as establishing conversations, discussions and group work are more difficult to recreate in a virtual classroom than in face-to-face contexts (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003), the role of the instructor or e-moderator (Salmon, 2000) is critical. This was also demonstrated by the data and highlights the following aspects of online interaction in that: (a) a large amount of lecturer time is required to facilitate online discussion, (b) traditional distance learning postgraduate course need considerable re-designing to work effectively as online courses, for example, more authentic tasks need to be included, and (c) considerable lecturer assistance, through frequent (daily) monitoring and contribution is required in initial stages to facilitate interaction and to ensure engagement by all participants.

Finally, this exploratory study demonstrated that more research on approaches to online pedagogy are needed. For example, could categorization of the types of instructor postings as 'Administrative', 'Affective', 'Other', 'Corrective', 'Informative' and 'Socratic' type messages (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003) determine which instructor postings were seen by students as facilitating online interaction? How frequently and in what ways does a lecturer need to interact to facilitate greater levels of student engagement online? In what ways can online surveys, quizzes and rubrics be used to obtain formative feedback during the course? To what extent does the design of an online course to focus on authentic experiences promote engagement in online interaction and the development of online communities? Further exploration of these questions will provide answers for improving the pedagogy of online courses.

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