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CHARACTER-ACTING ONLINE: USING ROLE-PLAY TO DEVELOP STAFF TRAINING RESOURCES

Debbi Weaver and Katalin Kish
Higher Education Development Unit,
Centre for Learning & Teaching Support
Monash University, AUSTRALIA
debbi.weaver@celts.monash.edu.au, katalin.kish@celts.monash.edu.au

Abstract

This paper describes the design and implementation of a professional development workshop for university staff in using WebCT to manage their students' progress. The workshop required the design of an online unit, complete with student submissions and assessment result, and development of authentic activities around this resource. Colleagues participated in a role-play exercise to populate the online unit with student activity, according to designated 'personalities' and study styles. This paper also discusses the subsequent use of this resource in the staff development workshop.

Keywords

Professional development, role-play, authentic learning, WebCT

Introduction

During 2001, Monash University adopted WebCT as its centrally-supported learning management system, to deliver online teaching across its 5 Australian and 2 overseas campuses. Implementation of an integrated professional development program has been described previously (Weaver, Button & Gilding, 2002; Spratt, Weaver, Maskill & Kish, 2003). Recent developments in the training program are also discussed in another paper at this conference (Weaver, submitted).

The training program is based around a generic program of 4 face-to-face workshops introducing WebCT. These workshops require staff to commit to 2 full days out of their busy program. Even though a further 2 days could easily be filled, it is unrealistic to expect staff to be able to take this time out from their existing duties. Staff are also already concerned about information overload after the existing program. In any case, learning some of the more advanced features of WebCT are best achieved when staff have had time to become more familiar with the basic functions, and have had time to develop some of their own teaching strategies.

The authors have been responsible for providing staff support in using WebCT across all campuses of Monash, and have effectively maintained a staff helpdesk, until the official student helpdesk, maintained and properly supported by CeLTS, were able to take over the more demanding role of providing support for all staff. During this process, the authors were required to answer many questions dealing with student management issues, and hence the idea of a workshop to deal with these issues arose.

This paper discusses the design and implementation of a new staff development workshop, targeted at staff new to teaching online, but who have begun using WebCT, usually during the current semester. The design of this workshop arose in response to the perceived need of academic staff to learn more effective strategies for managing their students in the online environment.

Development of the online unit

The new workshop was required to fit in with the format of existing workshops, in that it had to be hands-on, and allow scope for workshop participants to explore features at their own pace. The pace of any workshop is generally set by the slowest participant, so it was important for the workshop to contain enough additional activities to challenge those who are quicker at incorporating new ideas. In addition, it was important for the activities of the workshop to be as authentic as possible, matched as nearly as practicable to the real tasks academic staff are likely to be required to undertake in their own online teaching (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003).

Accordingly, it was agreed to develop an online WebCT unit, with enough content to represent 2 weeks of a fictional online subject. The unit would be populated with student activity and submissions to allow workshop participants to explore data which may not yet be available from their own online teaching. Colleagues were enrolled as fictional students, and asked to work through the unit at different paces, obeying different personalities and online learning styles (as stipulated by the authors), to provide our workshop participants with the opportunity to identify these differences from the student's online work. This approach was believed to combine the well-documented advantages of authentic learning (for the workshop participants) (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003) with the engaging and experiential learning advantages of role-play activities (for the authors and colleagues) (Vincent & Shepherd, 1998; Freeman & Capper, 1999; Naidu, Ip & Linser, 2000) to develop a comprehensive set of online resources for the staff development workshops.

Visual and performing arts were chosen as the subject for our online unit (using lightweight content), as this was considered an area that most participants (both colleagues completing the role-play and the workshop participants) could relate to without discipline-specific background. We deliberately did not want to engage workshop participants too much with the actual content of the unit, as this might distract from the pedagogical benefits of the exercise. A search was conducted for pages of content that could be incorporated without infringing copyright, and sources were always acknowledged. The unit was structured around 2 modules of content, each one finishing with a short quiz and assignment, to be submitted online. In addition, students were required to respond to 4 discussion topics set by the lecturer during that period.

Our intention was that most role play students would have completed the first module of content, and responded to some of the discussion topics, but that some students would lag behind, and one or two students would have completed the second module of content.

The role-play exercise

After the content of the online unit was complete, 12 fictional students were enrolled (using famous names in painting, dance and acting), and these roles were assigned to 5 colleagues (including the authors), complete with instructions regarding online personalities and how much work to complete. Several people played more than one role, providing a challenge when responding to discussion messages from your alter ego! Examples of these instructions are provided in Table 1 (not all students are included).

Name	Group	Profile
Anna	Dance	Keen student, reads everything posted, posts several discussion messages, and replies to lots of others. Has completed all assignments and quizzes.
Margot	Dance	Average student, worked through most of module 1. Has completed assignment and quiz. Lurker in discussion, reads, but does not post.
Rudolph	Dance	Quiet student - reads some messages, and posts few responses. Does not initiate discussion. Only read a few pages of module 1. Has completed quiz 1.
Jackson	Visual arts	Average student. Has worked through most of module 1, but not yet looked at module 2. Has completed assignment 1 and quiz 1
Leonardo	Visual arts	Average in content completed - read all module 1 but none of module 2. Has completed quiz and assignment. Posts some messages, but rather insensitive.

Sidney	Visual arts	Has not yet logged on.
Greta	Drama	Average student. Has worked through most of module 1, but not yet looked at module 2. Has completed assignment 1 and quiz 1
Jackie	Drama	Average student. Has worked through most of module 1, but not yet looked at module 2. Has completed assignment 1 and quiz 1. Lurker in discussion.
Robert	Drama	Completely dominates discussion. Posts often, and responds to everyone else's contributions. Average in other areas.

Table 1: Instructions to role-play participants.

All participants in this exercise were highly-skilled at training in using WebCT or in advising academic staff on design of online units. However, staff still commented that participation as students, albeit fictional, gave a clearer insight into how students might actually use WebCT, and what their specific online experiences might be like. Similar experiences have been reported by O'Reilly and Ellis (2002). Even though we regularly warn staff that students may have unrealistic expectations about how quickly staff should respond to online discussion messages, we experienced frustration ourselves to delays in responses to our own postings, even over such a short time-span as the duration of this exercise. One participant, who was instructed to act as a 'lurker' in the online discussions found this particularly frustrating, and resorted to private emails to communicate with fellow participants!

However, the participants all found this an excellent team-building exercise - while the task was work-related, it was completely different to our usual activities, involved more collaboration than is usually possible, and was also fun!

Implementation

After completion of the role-play exercise, the online unit was cloned to allow each workshop participant their own unit to investigate and manipulate during a 3-hour face-to-face workshop. A 'dress-rehearsal' was conducted, with key Faculty contacts acting as workshop participants. This allowed the key stakeholders to provide feedback on the content and structure of the workshop, and for the training team to practice delivery of the new material. The workshop was conducted for the first time with the wider university community during the mid-year break in 2003.

The workshop presenter followed a structured program of working through different student-management features, but always allowing participants opportunities to explore other features at their own pace and according to their own learning style. For each feature explored, the benefits or possible disadvantages for staff and students, and examples of use in common teaching practice were discussed. For many participants, this was invaluable, as they were able to discuss their own teaching practice, and share experiences with colleagues from other disciplines or campuses.

The workshop began with exploration of the online unit, to allow participants to become familiar with the layout of content and assessment activities. The class then worked through tracking student progress, to identify which students had failed to log on to WebCT, and which students had accessed which material. This then moved on to investigating how many discussion messages students had posted, and searching for these to assess the quality of messages and responses. Quiz and assignment submissions were accessed, and some time was spent investigating the different statistics generated for the automatically-graded multiple-choice questions. Workshop participants then worked through different ways to manipulate the student table in their online unit, by adding additional information for each student (eg. tutorial groups, marks from an offline activity), calculating end of semester marks, and downloading information to their own computers. Finally, participants enrolled each other as tutors in their WebCT unit, and explored the different access level available to tutors. These activities were all selected as likely to be required by most staff developing online units, and were designed to be as authentic as possible.

Discussion

Staff have enjoyed the fun and authentic nature of the online unit, and have often wanted more time to read through the discussion messages posted by their 'students'! Although we had explicitly sought to discourage participants from engaging with the content of the unit, the humour used by some of the role-play fictional students did appear to distract somewhat from the pedagogical aim. Feedback from participants so far, both unsolicited and from evaluation surveys conducted during the face-to-face workshops, has been highly positive. Staff have appreciated learning more efficient ways to monitor their students' progress, and have especially enjoyed learning new strategies for managing their student data. In particular, they have mentioned the benefits of having student submissions to work with, including discussion postings, assessment results, and quiz statistics. This data is not available to staff beginning their online teaching, and once students have participated in the online sites, staff are often nervous to explore student submissions for fear of accidentally modifying or deleting the data. By allowing staff this opportunity to investigate the features of the learning management system in a live site but with safety, helps to accommodate staff with different learning styles, often neglected in our concern for catering to different student learning styles.

By demonstrating and highlighting the strategic use of particular tools to achieve best practices in communicating and providing feedback to students, the workshop design allows participants to feed back ideas on pedagogically-sound design into further development of their own units.

Conclusions

We have designed an online unit as a resource for a new staff training workshop, which allows academic staff to explore management of their online students. Development of the online resource, which involved colleagues participating in a role-play exercise, gave new insights into the student experience of learning online, even for staff highly experienced in training in this area.

This resource, with authentic activities designed around it to demonstrate management of student activities online, has been used in very successful and popular face-to-face workshops, allowing us to provide a fun and productive training experience.

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