

FOSTERING ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES THROUGH INSTRUCTOR NETWORKING

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Abstract

A common model for offshore teaching involves intensive delivery by Australian academic with local staff supporting the subject. Technology has become a commonplace means of delivering subject material, including material supporting subjects being taught in an intensive manner offshore. This paper reports preliminary results of a trial conducted delivering University of Wollongong course content into INTI College, Sarawak, Malaysia making use of existing technology.

Keywords

Distance education, Internet education technologies, class management package

Introduction

Australia was a pioneer in distance education. The ‘School of the Air’, using pedal radios, allowed students to communicate with both their teacher and other members of their “classroom”, despite being hundreds of kilometres apart. This tradition of distance education continues today, with the radios replaced by more modern technologies.

Traditional approaches to distance education were largely paper based. A student would enrol in a subject and then receive through the mail a package containing text book, readings, subject outline and the description of the assessment tasks required. Interaction between the student and the academic who designed the course was limited to the occasional comment on returned assignments, or rarer still, a telephone conversation that would have been initiated by the student. This approach does not build a sense of belonging to a candidature, institution or even a group as all work was done on an individual basis.

More recently, technology has become a commonplace means of supporting or delivering subject material. A now more commonplace method for transmitting information to the student is to establish a contained web site where students can access material, contact their academic and post questions to each other in a discussion area. This method is normally supported by a class management package (CMP).

There has been rapid growth in the number of University of Wollongong (UOW) degrees being taught offshore over the past four years. As a consequence, there has been a substantial increase in the use of WebCT, the university supported CMP, to facilitate the distance student being in touch with the relevant information. Most class management packages allow for the creation a distinct group where entry is only

possible once a set of criteria is met. This does engender some sense of belonging to a particular group, however, isolation is still possible if an individual student does not participate in the activities presented.

Common teaching models for a subject taught off-shore but coordinated from Australia involve at most, an intensive 1 – 2 week delivery of course material, with local staff managing the remainder. This is not an ideal situation as it appears to diminish the status of the offshore academic. This can be overcome by developing an instructor network and ensuring that all instructors have input into the subject.

Earlier this year, we proposed an alternate approach making use of existing technology to continue interaction between students and the Australian academic throughout the semester (Fuller & McFarlane, 2002a). This paper will discuss our first experiences using a CMP, NetMeeting and email to address the issues of isolation, community, networking and participation.

The Proposal

Our proposal is an implementation of the POSITIVE Model for Offshore Team Teaching. (McFarlane & Fuller, 2002b). This approach to offshore teaching ensures that the role of the offshore academic is that of an equal partner and has many benefits for both staff and students (Fuller & McFarlane, 2002a).

We have previously found WebCT to be extremely useful in building online communities of students (Fuller et al, 2001). Many students who might be reluctant to participate in classroom discussions are less retiring when it comes to electronic discussion. The asynchronous communication provided by message boards can be extremely useful for handling enquiries from remote students.

We planned to combine WebCT, the telephone, email, NetMeeting and PowerPoint presentations, as well as one week in intensive mode for the delivery of one particular subject. This subject was to be taught at INTI College, Kuching, Sarawak, for the May session, commencing 30 April.

This offering of the subject differs from previously, in that the Australian based academic continues to interact synchronously with the overseas students, after completion of the intensive week, via online conferences using NetMeeting, scheduled fortnightly. These are essentially tutorial sessions and provide students with the opportunity for question and answer sessions, with both the Australian and offshore academic present.

Technology Trial

The initial technology trial took place in April 2002. The UOW academic who is teaching the subject for the May session, visited Sarawak to conduct other unrelated business. This provided an opportunity to test the quality of the transmission between Wollongong and Sarawak.

The first trial involved initiating contact at the Sarawak end from an academic's personal PC. Initially this was not as successful as we hoped. Sound quality was poor, and there were difficulties comprehending conversation at each end. Fortunately, a subsequent test the following day using the lecture theatre where the subject will be conducted was much more successful. Sound quality was much improved using the lecture theatre public address system rather than personal PC speakers.

During this session we experimented with both having UOW control the PowerPoint display, i.e. controlling the slide changes while conducting a monologue, and passing control of PowerPoint to INTI. As a result we decided that UOW would control the PowerPoint display with INTI advising verbally when the slide was fully loaded.

Delay between voice and PowerPoint at no time exceeded eight seconds. This was felt to be manageable in future to lecture/PowerPoint delivery. However, there is a need for some kind of protocol regarding the voice

transmission, slide loading, slide changeover and question time. Failure to do adhere to a protocol resulted in both sides talking over each other, and discussing points on slides that had not completely loaded.

The trial also identified possible changes to the equipment to be used when the class starts, including the use of a microphone with echo reduction and an on/off switch. This would reduce the amount of echo and feedback experienced during the initial trial.

Implementation

This trial also saw a great deal of preliminary planning between the academic team. These discussions covered areas such as assessment, organisation, NetMeeting times and venues, required level of student participation and future technology requirements.

During the first week of May, the UOW academic delivered much of the subject content in the usual intensive manner. An initial contact using NetMeeting was made one week prior. During this meeting the UOW academic introduced herself to the students and explained how the process would operate.

Student participation in the WebCT forums was made mandatory in that marks are awarded for quality of participation. Groups of students were assigned discussion topics each fortnight and were expected to discuss these in the forums. Both members of the academic team monitor these discussions and provide feedback to students during the synchronous sessions as well as leading further discussion involving the rest of the class.

The UOW academic conducted “mini-lectures” to extend material presented in the intensive week and ensure students remained in touch with course content. The first two of these “mini-lectures” were not successful. The trials in the empty lecture theatre were undertaken during a non-teaching week when there was little traffic on the college’s network. However, during semester, the much heavier load on the network apparently meant less bandwidth available, and we encountered considerable interference and breaking up of the transmission. This was eventually overcome by setting NetMeeting to operate in half duplex mode, meaning that only one side at a time could speak. Subsequent lectures have been much improved, with only an occasional problem, which is usually handled by having the remote academic request that the last sentence be repeated.

Expected Outcomes

It is hoped that this continued contact with UOW will both engender a greater sense of belonging to UOW and overcome many of the difficulties associated with previous modes of distance delivery. Results of a questionnaire surveying student reactions to this trial indicated an overall positive reaction. Most negative comments mentioned were of the same ilk, “You can’t sleep in these online sessions, you have to pay attention.” Having to pay attention is a criticism we are prepared to live with.

Conclusion

We have successfully established that it is possible to conduct lectures using NetMeeting. The first subject to be offered in this manner commenced April 30th and ran until the end of July. This subject was closely monitored to determine benefits and difficulties associated with the approach as well as formulating strategies for future improvements. Without the cooperation, enthusiasm and interest of the INTI staff, this approach would not have been successful. The local academic was able to make insightful immediate contributions to the subject material and lecture delivery thus reinforcing her role as a valued member of the teaching team.

The academics at INTI have shown an interest in this delivery style and are taking steps to further this test program. INTI has requested that another subject should be run as an online one to extend the experiment to a more traditional subject. Furthermore, the college has run a phone line into the lecture theatre in an effort to

improve the communication link. UOW has established an online component of another subject that is currently being intensively delivered to further explore this POSITIVE approach to e- education.

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