‘ANYBODY OUT THERE A REAL EXPERT?’

Transition into the Online Learning Environment by First Year University Students

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Abstract: This paper reports on an evaluation of online learning in a large Australian undergraduate first year university subject. A central focus is the effectiveness web based learning and its implications for facilitating transition pathways into a new learning environment by new university students. The research is situated within a framework of action research and curriculum evaluation by exploring the different uses of a subject web site. Student postings on the web site bulletin board were evaluated. The interpretive content analysis indicates that the online mode of delivery is most beneficial in the distance education mode acting as a socialization and inter-relational device.

Key words: higher education, teacher education, curriculum development, pedagogy, research

1. INTRODUCTION

Web-based learning is fast becoming an everyday concept among beginning students in Australian Higher Education. Most university subjects are now offered in distance mode utilizing online technology. This has provided students with added flexibility, enabling learning to be undertaken anytime of the day and from anywhere in the World.

There are wide-ranging applications for a successful online learning system. For example, online technology is useful for facilitating transition into Higher Education by school leavers, as well as by professionals returning to university study. In such settings, online technology acts as a resource in providing procedural knowledge (Biggs, 2001, p. 48) about the institution and the course structure over and above the actual subject content.

Academic reading and writing is one such supplementary area. The procedural knowledge required to compose a high standard university essay, for example, is not explicitly taught as part of subject content. Thus, an interactive online facility addressing academic and information literacy can equip beginning students with a wealth of necessary procedural knowledge and generic skills that are integral to a successful university career.

2. FIRST YEAR ORIENTATION

The success of online learning is based on the assumption of some prior information technology (IT) skills. While many students today enter university with at least basic computer skills, it poses potential problems for those students who lack them. How accessible is a web resource to students who have little previous experience with computers, let alone the Internet? It raises important issues about the effectiveness of online learning as a resource in the process of transition into university study. In the subject evaluated for this research, students are provided with web-based resources to support their first year orientation. The subject homepage, which is often the first website students encounter as part of their online learning career, lists information with links to a network of student information and resources within and outside the institution and the World Wide Web.

Previous subject evaluations give the impression that students make active use of the information provided on this site. What has not been formally investigated in this context, however, is the depth and breadth of site uses that may provide objectives for developing and implementing specific areas of the subject's online curriculum. This paper reports on the experiences of first year university students enrolled in a large core subject with an obligatory online study component. The aims of this research are:

1. A partial focus is on evaluating students' uses of the online teaching mode for subject curriculum development and implementation by the convener.
2. To allow the evaluation to inform future pedagogical practices in and through the e-learning environment.
3. To explore implications for enhancing the first year transition experiences through online technologies.

The following section describes the methodological framework of the curriculum evaluation research.

3. THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The theoretical conceptualisation of this research is located within the philosophical perspective of knowledge as constitutive of, and constructed by, everyday practices and social actions (e.g. Sacks, 1992). The premise of this theory for learning is that it is situated and cannot be separated from the context within which it is constructed (Lave & Wenger, 1993). Therefore, an exploration of everyday online interactions—such as that provided by a website bulletin/discussion board in a given university subject—yields insights into the types of knowledge and meanings that are constructed within that environment. It is the premise of this research that these different types of knowledge constitute the overall student experiences of online learning.

The research data sample consists of 288 student postings to a core subject online bulletin board. The overall student population in the subject concerned is in the low six hundreds of a one semester introductory first year subject in Education. The subject has a compulsory online assessment component. Students are advised to access the online mode as soon as they have gained entry into the subject after enrolment. Students are encouraged to use the bulletin board for general communication purposes. They are informed about ethical conduct regarding politeness and so called ‘netiquette’ issues.

The study has received clearance from the University’s Ethical Research office. The students were aware that their written messages might become part of an action research study. In order to protect students’ identities, the postings were removed from the bulletin board by a research assistant who coded and deleted students’ names. The final data sample contained only coded identifiers attached to each posting, for increasing readability and interpretation of the sequencing of communication.

4. RESULTS

An interpretive content analysis (Freebody, Ludwig, Gunn, 1995) was conducted on the selected data sample. It revealed five broad themes of talk into which the student text samples could be thematically grouped. The unedited data are listed in Table 1 below. It is now commonly known that communication in cyberspace has constructed a function that is fast disappearing in real life, namely that of allowing for closeness and directness between communicators (Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard, 1998).

Table 1. Number of postings according to textual themes and corresponding content¹

Theme	content	content	content
Initial introductory logon n = 68	Seeking contact n=37	Orientation n=46	Disclosing previous experiences n=30
Seeking help n=24	Audio n=4	Software related n=11	Other n=9
Procedural knowledge n=60	Assignments and exam n=36	Online component n=21	Research related n=9
Evaluative n=14	Affective n=6	Constructive feedback n=7	Other n=2

¹ Numbers are not exclusive

It was therefore not surprising to find that the majority of messages on the bulletin board were posted for the purpose of establishing personal contact. For example, finding a companion to study with was a particularly frequent topic among distance education students. A combination of themes introducing oneself with a short biography, and calls for a study partner, were also prevalent among the first postings. Typical messages in this category read as follows:

“Hi I’m a mature student too. Don’t worry (name) find yourself a study buddy it helps enormously and you don’t feel alone.”

“K here again. A study buddy sounds like a good idea. Anyone in (Suburb) area interested in study buddying with me, just let me know.”

The sense of distance and isolation created by cyberspace (Gibbs & Krause, 2000) generates a need to form unanimous communities. Themes combining an introduction with suggestions for information about the subject administration and structure appeared among the bulletin postings within the first two weeks of term. Since the bulletin board is primarily meant as a student facility with little academic staff input, such requests for help were ordinarily answered by fellow students. Thus, students realized the supportive function of the site relatively swiftly.

In some cases, the online mode was used for seeking help with online technology. Procedural knowledge is a central concern, for example questions about downloading free software from the Internet for accessing online subject audio-visual data, such as audio lectures and lecture notes. Students had some trouble with hands-on tasks such as navigating the internet, finding and saving web browser ‘plugins’, and downloading other software products. An exchange of instructions was made available by fellow students, for example:

“Click on the “lecture theatre” icon to view links to the online audio version of lectures and accompanying slides...” or “Try this, right click on the link, choose folder and file name, click. Worked for me.”

Many postings (n=60) concerned procedural knowledge. Thirty-six of these involved assessment tasks. Issues ranged from how to conduct research with human subjects, to interviewing techniques and finding information for report writing, using citations and other issues related to academic literacy. Students also used the bulletin board to acquire procedural knowledge about the institution and different discipline areas. It acted as a resource for ‘finding your way around the university’. Eleven postings addressed the online component of compulsory subject assessment. Many questions seemed to arise from failing to read and follow instructions, typing errors (such as ignoring case sensitivity when it is required etc.) and poor computer skills (such as right/left click on a mouse). For example:

“I’ve talked to a few people who say they can’t get the online version of the lectures....I’ve tried as well, unsuccessfully.. I know you can get the tapes from the library, but it would be nice to be able to get them to work, wouldn’t it? Anybody out there a real expert?”

The latter case is of most interest to the evaluation of online subject delivery. Students in this subject are offered extensive assistance in basic to advanced computer technology skills. Scaffolded instructions about how to download ‘plugin’ software from the Internet, for example, can be found on many websites. Further, instructions are made available in printed format in this instance and handed out to students. Students also have ICT training available to them through the University library. With the provision of training the assumption of prior knowledge is, in this instance, warranted.

However, these postings infer that students have failed to a) take advantage of the IT learning opportunities available to them at the start of term or b) have not retained and/or applied the information provided in training sessions. What seems puzzling is the lack of transfer between instructions received and application of the basic IT skills.

4.1 Further research

Further research is need to determine the motivating factors behind such failures. Is there a belief among students that IT skills are somewhat auxiliary, as opposed to obligatory, for successfully completing the subject? What are the institutional, behavioural and/or motivational variables preventing students from acquiring procedural knowledge in IT skills? The final category has the theme of evaluation of the online learning experience.

In the last week of term, students were asked to provide feedback on the bulletin board about their learning experiences. The postings in this theme have two features, 'affective remarks' and 'constructive feedback'. The nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been documented as enabling for more emotive expressions than communication in 'real life' (Cerulo, 1997). Emotive commentary appeared in all categories of text samples. Recall from above the terms 'felt a bit lost', 'felt overwhelmed', 'pretty scared', 'petrified'. Other expressive comments were of a more spontaneous nature such as:

"...just wanted to say that this web site rocks. I have found so much info for my study...thank you to (name) for supplying this web site"

Constructive feedback about the web site was expressed in more formal context, as in the following:

"...this website has been very helpful and informative, thank you to whoever designed and helped out in general with this subject."

It seems that cyberspace provided an easier mode for expressing one's feelings about a learning experience generally, and about online learning in particular. On the other hand, there were no negative evaluative expressions on the online content. Negative feedback addressed other aspects of the subject content, such as the textbook and assessment. The data represented in Table 1 suggests that the student experience of online learning is a positive one despite an evident lack of initial procedural knowledge in IT skills. The bulletin board text samples indicate that regardless of some technical difficulties students made immediate and active use of the online mode in the first weeks of their university candidature. The function for narrowing communicative distance was also realized by the users of the discussion board. Effortless comments about personal and biographical information were posted with the apparent aim of establishing closer relationships with other users of the site.

5. DISCUSSION

The immediate ease with which students adopted the online learning mode indicates that it provides a means for aiding transition into university study. The analyses of discussion postings strongly suggest that students readily accessed the web based learning mode and used this as an orientation resource. The web bulletin board served as a device for constructing

cohesion within the student population. This allowed students to draw upon each other for help.

A number of implications stem from these findings. First, there is sufficient evidence here for expanding the development of online learning modes for first year student transition purposes. The system can act as a spring board for finding general information about the institution and its structures as well as an understanding of some disciplinary cultural practices, such as genres for assignment writing. More importantly, with increasing globalization of university programs, the online learning mode fills an important function for distance education.

Students logging on to the website discussion board from remote locations can engage in meaningful interaction with fellow students sharing similar experiences. Interaction with more experienced fellow students is reassuring for first year students in transition into a university career (Austin, Covalea, Weal, 2002; McInnis, 2001). As indicated by the few examples above of student interactive exchanges, the bulletin board constructs a pedagogical relationship of mediating mentoring between experienced students and their inexperienced student counterparts.

Further implications concern the development of subject curriculum to incorporate online materials designed specifically for the transition objectives. One example currently in place is the Writing Gateway Project university web site focusing on academic literacy. On this site students are able to complete workshops, draft assignments and browse previous course work samples in a given learning discipline.

6. CONCLUSION

Clearly, continued evaluation of the pedagogical functions of web sites are needed, especially in subjects with large student numbers such as the current one. The pedagogical applicability of the contents of web sites in some cases need to be revised to suit the needs of the immediate student group. Needs analyses are beneficial here and can be conducted by simple means of discussion boards. The benefit of continued subject revision for enhanced teaching and learning opportunities are then warranted by providing a context for situated learning opportunities within and through online practices.

One consideration of the data corpus of this study is the possibility that the text samples may have been posted by students particularly well versed in CMC. The contents acknowledging application failures and asking for help that were so prevalent among the first discussion postings however, indicates the contrary. It provides a firm basis for assuming that at least the

majority of postings in our data sample derived from students with a range of computer skills. Clearly, future research exploring the student perspectives of online learning and its impact on the first year transition path is needed as are studies expanded to a wider student sample across disciplinary boundaries. In sum, the current findings support the positive implications of online teaching and learning for constructing pedagogical pathways through the first year study experience. The outcomes suggest that a variety of mentor and transition programs may benefit from a combination of face to face and online curriculum offerings.

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BIOGRAPHY

Meeri Hellstén has lectured in Teacher Education since 1993. Some of her particular research interests are in the areas of effective teaching and learning, transition experiences in Higher Education, cross-cultural and international education and e-learning. She is previously published by Multilingual Matters and currently by Routledge.

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