Chapter XXII

Web-Based Seminar Work

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INTRODUCTION

General

Telecommunications are vital devices for researchers to exchange information between researchers located in different places around the globe. This kind of exchange can be regarded as external concerning individual institutions. But also internally there are people with matching interests. Why should they hold their seminars or meetings gathering in one place face-to-face at the pre-agreed point of time? This question has lately puzzled the academic community, and will still puzzle during the years to come. Further questions also arise: Will the Internet and WWW technology provide novel solutions? Does the new technology drastically change the dynamics of such group gatherings?

The Internet must be seen more than a new medium. It is an infrastructure for commerce, a universal conduit of ideas, a parallel universe where people are exchanging information on an unprecedented scale (Schwartz 1997). Changes in the modes of communication are also emerging. We have at our disposal a powerful medium suited for one-to-one and many-to-many communications (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). On a practical level these developments can be seen in the speed of diffusion of this new technology. Finland, for instance, has turned out to be one of the densest Internet countries in the world. There are 500,000 daily and one million weekly Internet-users (Finland has a total population of 5.1 million). Thirty-six per cent of all the users classify as students, which is not surprising, since all universities in Finland have Internet connections and e-mail addresses available for student use (TOY Research 11/1998). The Internet is also by nature an open system. Thus, in practice for the first time, we now have at our disposal a tool that allows us easily to connect and work within the university as well as with other universities.

The Internet has drastically enhanced the availability of reference material and changed the way references are sought. As the number of electronic publications on the

Internet is rapidly increasing, students have less need to rely on the material available at their local libraries. At the moment, at the university where the authors reside, the students have Internet access to five large electronic publication databases. Those include EBSCO — Academic Search Elite, ABI Inform — ProQuest Direct, PCI — Periodicals Contents Index, CSA — Cambridge Scientific Abstracts and Emerald Intelligence, plus dozens of individual journals. This means that information sharing among students becomes easier, and students have access to material previously extremely difficult to obtain. This also presents new challenges to the teachers. On the one hand, the role of the teacher as a center of knowledge is diminishing. On the other hand it is easier for the teacher to verify the references, but also easier for the students to plagiarize. Information can be reproduced online without loss of value, and in such a way that the original source or holder of the information can not even notice that it has been used (Johnson, 1997; Shapiro and Varian, 1999).

Definitions

In Europe and especially in the Nordic countries, the term seminar is used in two different meanings. As an institution it refers on the one hand to an educational institute for nursery and elementary school teachers or priests, and on the other hand to a specific form of education. The second and a wider meaning for the word is an event for presenting or elaborating (conceiving) ideas or models for operation. Etymologically, the term originates from the Latin word 'semen', nursery or garden, and the word seed has been derived from it in many languages. In this chapter we will use the term in the meaning of a special educational activity in the university curriculum.

It is usual to have seminars at different levels of the curriculum at the university. They are deemed to give the students a chance to present their ability to manage a research project on their own. In lower level seminars students are usually given a subject and some literature to study. From these each creates a report (paper) and presents it to the participants at a seminar session. These occasions resemble public dissertations with opponents (not always) in a minor scale. One has to defend his/her work "publicly" among peers. In these occasions the role of the teacher is to chair these sessions, not so much teach (of course the teacher later assesses and approves the performance). This way a seminar differs significantly from lectures and cannot be regarded as a teaching incident but as a cooperative learning incident.

In the Finnish university curricula, a special seminar is used as a part of the requirements for achieving a master's degree. Before starting the preparation of the master thesis, a student has to provide a plan for the study, which he/she presents in a seminar session, where it is discussed following a formal code resembling public dissertation. Each participant is required to be present at all sessions, present his/her progress and act as an opponent once and also actively take part in the discussions during the seminar, which normally assembles two hours weekly during the whole term.

Higher education at an advanced level consists of integrating the most recent research results in the field with the teacher's own knowledge and models of thought. In ancient Greece, the teacher was a personification of knowledge, who led the students through dialogue into knowledge. In our time the number of students has become so large, that instead of a dialogue, students have to acquire the bulk of their information from books or similar outlets.

It is also impossible for one teacher to master all the knowledge even in one field. Knowledge is collectively divided between a certain group of people and has therefore been made impersonal and abstracted. This 'guild' leads its new members to knowledge. An

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