

Chapter 11

Free, Open, Online Help Forums: Convenience, Connection, Control, Comfort, and Communication

Carla van de Sande
Arizona State University, USA

ABSTRACT

In contrast to course delivery, help seeking has not advanced with the technological capabilities and preferences of today's students. Help seeking in higher education remains primarily an individual, private, face-to-face activity. Open, online, help forums have the potential to transform help seeking into a public, social endeavor. These forums connect students with volunteer helpers who have the time, knowledge, and willingness to provide assistance with specific problems from coursework. Although many such forums currently exist and are a popular source of help seeking, they have remained largely off the radar of educational research. In this paper, a calculus help forum is examined for manifestations of convenience, connection, and control, which are commonly used to describe student expectations regarding information technology use. Results indicate that students can receive efficient, accessible, and self-regulated help. Two additional themes for student experience, comfort and communication, are proposed.

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INTRODUCTION

Many innovative efforts are underway to transform higher education to better serve the Net Generation (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). The most dramatic change that has occurred in recent years is that students can now take courses online and are no longer required to physically visit campus to receive instructional materials, communicate with other students, and take assessments. In this way, online education addresses the prevailing need for education to be flexible, convenient, and compatible with other activities and commitments.

Socio-technical systems (cf., Coakes, 2002) are at the heart of this institutional shift from face-to-face to computer-mediated activities, linking the efficient and/or effective use of technology with the expectations of current students. For instance, students enrolled together in an online course make use of course forums or discussion boards to communicate with one another and to share and integrate knowledge. At the same time, the forums as a technical system influence the ways in which students communicate and collaborate with one another. These students, who interact in an ongoing basis and share common concerns and tasks, can be considered as an online community (Preece et al., 2004). Broader socio-technical communities in the context of higher education also exist, for instance when a large number of people (an extension of an academic department) have the opportunity to share information on study habits and discuss the content and exercises of lectures and seminars within an online knowledge sharing community, such as InPUD, (Jahnke, 2008).

However, when it comes to seeking problem-specific help on assignments, universities still provide students with many of the same options as existed previously. Students can visit their instructors during office hours or communicate with them via computer. For more anonymous help, most universities also staff help centers

where students can receive face-to-face help on their course assignments during hours of operation. Although some progressive institutions offer computer-mediated access to their help centers (Schumann & Geiman, 2009), this model of help is still based on set, restricted hours of operation and one-on-one assistance. In this way, the provision of (anonymous) help in higher education appears to have become fossilized as a private, individual activity between a helper and a student that is generally conducted in face-to-face interaction. In particular, the role that social networks play in student expectations and experience has not been fully taken into account, especially given the body of research and controversy pointing to the use of socio-technical tools (such as Facebook) to facilitate students working together on assignments in study groups (Goodall, 2008; Selwyn, 2007; 2009).

What mode of assistance is more consistent with the way that students prefer to interact and learn with others? Just as students use the Internet routinely for finding information and communicating with others, they are also using the Internet as a resource for completing their assignments through participation in free, open, online help forums (van de Sande & Leinhardt, 2007b). Many such forums exist and allow students everywhere to communicate anonymously and asynchronously with volunteers around the world who have the time, willingness, and experience to help them. These forums cover a wide variety of subject areas at several levels, ranging from the language arts to the natural sciences in instruction that spans the elementary level to higher education. Mathematics is one of the more popular forum subject areas, with frequent and urgent requests for help in challenging and homework-intensive courses such as algebra and calculus. Students post queries (usually problem-specific questions from assignments) on these forums when they are seeking anonymous help constructing a solution to a problem or when they are seeking verification of a solution that

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