The Use of Online Discussions to Enhance Face-to-Face Block Mode Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a case study of the use of web-based communication technologies in conjunction with block mode teaching. It describes how an online discussion forum increased the participation of students, and provided feedback to the instructor on student interaction, learning and understanding. The contribution of the paper is its description of the specific advantages, both to the instructor and the student, of supplementing block mode teaching with online discussions. Guidelines for setting up an online discussion forum in block mode teaching contexts are provided, highlighting those of particular relevance to the block mode context.

Keywords: Block mode, online discussions, web-based technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are increasingly choosing to present some course subjects via on-campus block mode or intensive programs presented over a one to four week period. One advantage of such programs is that they allow students to complete course requirements in a shorter time frame, whilst giving face-to-face access to instructors that may not be available on campus for longer periods. Another advantage is the opportunity to immerse students in a subject, with daily interactions giving both instructor and student the chance for more concentrated interaction. Use of visiting academics from other countries or specialized industrial or corporate instructors can enhance student opportunities for learning. Disadvantages of block mode teaching are that students do not have the time for wider reading and the deeper reflection and learning that may come when there is ample time for the linking of new knowledge to other subjects being studied at the same time (Burton & Nesbit, 2002; Davies, 2006).

These limitations can be partially overcome by providing students with greater opportunities for interaction with their fellow students and instructors both during and in between block mode sessions. One way of providing such increased opportunities is by supplementing formal lectures and tutorials with provision of an online discussion forum accessed using web-based communication technologies. Such web-based platforms for discussion can act as amplifiers, broadening the sharing of information beyond what is possible in an intense face-to-face environment (Tiene, 2000). Although the use of web-based communication technologies in conjunction with face-to-face instruction has been previously researched in detail (Dabbagh, 2002), their use in conjunction with block mode face-to-face teaching has been limited (Yorke et al., 2005; Fuller et al., 2003).

The focus of this paper is a case study that exemplifies the use of web-based communication technologies in conjunction with face-to-face block mode teaching. It describes how an online discussion forum increased the participation of students, and provided feedback to the instructor on student interaction, learning and understanding.

The contribution of the paper is its description of the specific advantages of supplementing block mode teaching with online discussions, both to the instructor and the student. It details how this can improve student participation and learning opportunities by expanding on already occurring classroom dynamics, and give the instructor greater awareness of student learning than would normally be available from face-to-face teaching alone. A set of guidelines is also provided for setting up an online discussion forum to be used in conjunction with block mode teaching.

USE OF ONLINE DISCUSSIONS IN EDUCATION

Online discussions are increasingly used in educational contexts as a component of both distance education and on-campus learning. Such discussions can produce more active engagement from students compared to the face-to-face environment (Muirhead, 2000; Thomerson & Smith, 1996) and have the potential to enhance student learning (Althaus, 1997; Dysthe, 2002; Vonderwell, 2002; Wu & Hiltz, 2004).

Students may find that the addition of online discussions to course teaching gives them more opportunity to reflect and respond to class material (Meyer, 2003; Wozniak & Silveira, 2004) as well as providing a space that suits some learning styles that are not well served in the face-to-face classroom (Poole, 2000; Scheiter, 1996). Minority or disenfranchised groups of students that avoid participation in face-to-face discussions will often express themselves more confidently in online discussions, although this may be dependent on use of a pseudonym (Anderson & Haddad, 2005; Chester & Gwynne, 1998).

Setting up an online discussion area does not guarantee its use. In all online environments, the role of the instructor in structuring and facilitating online discussions is critical to their success as a learning medium (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005; Hiltz, 1993; Salmon, 2000). Online discussions can be effective however, in providing opportunities for collaborative peer learning, conversations with instructors, and enhanced understanding through reflection and communication of developing ideas (Cowan, 2006; Laurillard, 2002).

USING ONLINE DISCUSSIONS WITH BLOCK MODE TEACHING

The case being discussed here involved the teaching of an on-campus block-mode subject with 72 enrolled second-year undergraduate students at a university in the Asia-Pacific region. Students were majoring in either business, information technology or a combination of the two. The instructor was flown in from outside the country for two 2-week periods of instruction, separated by 5 weeks in between. The students all had a good level of adeptness with the use of technology and reasonable proficiency in written English. The instructor had previously taught both online and on campus, but had not taught in block mode. The block mode teaching consisted of 6 days a week of teaching in a combination of lectures and tutorials. Students had 2 one-hour lectures and a two-hour tutorial each day, all given by one instructor. As the subject matter involved the use of technology, tutorials were conducted in a computer lab, with each student on a dedicated computer with access to the Internet.

Students were first introduced to the online discussion forum to be used in a tutorial. A few students had previous experience of similar technologies, but for most it was a new experience. Each student was asked to logon to the online forum and post an introduction message. The instructor had already setup discussion topics, and posted an introduction prior to the class, modeling the kind of responses that were required. Students were asked specifically to *"...let us know who you are, where you are from, why you are doing this course, and what your hobbies and interests are. You can also include a photo or a link to your webpage if you have one"*.

The student who had been the first to ask a question in lectures was also the one who was first to post their introduction in the online forum. The level of personal disclosure varied, with some posting their name and course only, and others detailing their hopes, dreams and life philosophies. There was also some comment on first

impressions of learning in block mode. None posted photos, but a small number linked to their personal web pages, inviting response and comment.

One advantage of this process was that all students got to know a bit about the others. As there were four streams of tutorials, this could not have been achieved by asking students to stand and introduce themselves in the classroom. Online introductions also enabled students and the instructor to refer to a person's introduction later on in order to recall who they were.   This was particularly useful in face-to-face block mode teaching, where there was less time to become familiar with faces and names through contact over a semester. A second advantage of the process was that it gave a voice to the quieter members of the class, and also enabled participation by those that were late or absent from the class. This was consistent with the greater confidence for some students that has been observed with anonymous interactions (Chester & Gwynne, 1998), although in this case, most students used their real names rather than a pseudonym.

As students became more familiar with using the online discussion forum, they began to adapt their use of it in different ways. For example, one student apologized to her fellow group assignment members,

" I wanna say sorry to my group mates ... for not being able to attend the discussions. When I feel better, then I'll be back!!! Any updates, pls let me know! " The disadvantage of having this visible communication available to students is that some learned they could sleep in and yet still log on to find out what was happening in the tutorial.

Using the first tutorial to get the students to post their introductions meant that the instructor was able to make sure that everyone was accounted for, match names to introductions, and assist anyone who was having difficulty with either registering or using the web-based software. It also allowed the instructor to ascertain whether people were having difficulties at an early stage of the classes.

Although the online forum was initially setup to teach students about internet technologies by first-hand experience, its advantages as a support to block mode teaching soon became apparent. Not only did it allow students and instructor to get to know more about each other, it provided feedback on course process and content, allowing changes to be made, or explanations to be provided in a more timely way than is possible when students are reluctant to ask questions face to face. It gave the instructor insight into attitudes about the course, as well as giving an indication of how engaged students were in their learning.

Initial use of the online forum as an addition to face-to-face classes received positive responses, as well as providing feedback on student apprehension about studying by block mode.

One student commented:

"I am actually finding this subject ...well actually this concept of just messaging and interacting while doing my ... course work quite interesting..... well the block mode system did not turn out that bad after all.... hope you ppl are enjoying this as much as I am".

Other positive comments were:

"I'm really looking forward to doing this subject now (yea...even though its a "block mode" subject)!" and "I'm very sleepy...it's 9.58 am on a rainy Saturday morning, usually I would still be sleeping, but this weekend I'm at uni!!! Although I must say, it isn't as bad as I thought it would be, this block mode isn't the nightmare I thought it would be."

There were, of course, also some negative responses:

"Aren't we getting a bit too excited over this message-posting business?" and "yes, finally!!!!!I just managed to get in....after struggling for say, almost half an hour!! Sigh.....how forgetful of me, really! Forgotten my username at first, then my password, then registered again and then waited for the acknowledgement, and then sigh...delaying here and there!!!!!"

Some of these responses were due to frustrations with the web-based technology itself, or with the process of its use interfering with what some considered "real learning".

A few students commented that they thought that interacting online was distracting from doing assignments and more serious study, and could not see any benefit from it. Once it was pointed out that some marks were to be allocated for online participation, everyone complied with at least the minimum interaction requirement.

As one student said:

"Well, I just can't find a time to log in here!! But let me introduce myself to you in this message board, as this will add some points into my record :)"

Although this means of getting student involvement detracted from the broader goal of peer learning, it did at least provide the opportunity for greater familiarity with the technology tools used, reflection on course content in responses to the required discussion topics, and a chance of increasing the interaction between the students themselves.

The responses also allowed the instructor to better ascertain the level of comfort each student had with English language, and pick up references to local language that was unfamiliar. This was important in giving assistance with assignment work, and referring students to appropriate support if it was necessary. Another benefit for the instructor was the information a few students provided about why they were not turning up to class. As one student said:

"Maybe I will be a while late for my tutorial .. since the sky is raining now .. I hope it won't traffic jam."

Not only was the instructor made aware of why, the student working from home could be brought up to date with the class material that they had missed.

During the break between the two 2-week teaching blocks, the instructor kept in touch with students via the online forum. Although a number of other communication channels were made available for contact with students during this time, such as email, phone and instant messaging, the predominant mode of contact the students chose was the online discussion forum.

This meant that students heard from the instructor even if they had not asked a question themselves, and everyone heard the answers to questions asked, so that no single student received unfair advantage from receiving information that others did not. It was also easier for the instructor to respond once in the online forum, rather than in a number of separate emails to students.

Although there was no new coursework during the break, students had been left with individual and group assignments to work on during this time. They were encouraged to report back regularly on their progress and any issues that arose, as well as give feedback on the conduct of the course, and ask questions on course content. This worked well, with students keeping their instructor in touch with progress on assignment work, and asking questions as they needed clarification on what was required of them.

One unexpected use of the Help Desk discussion area, set up by the instructor to answer student queries, was that it gained more use by the students helping each other.

Table 1 shows a list of the discussion topics, and the breakdown of student and instructor posts as a percentage of the total number of posts in each, giving an indication of where student participation was highest.

This shows that the Instructor made 25% of the postings, and the students the other 75%. This is a high workload for the instructor. It also shows the most active discussion to be the one on assessment tasks, which seems to fit with the common observation of student learning being dominated by a focus on what is required of them to pass the course, rather than the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake (Biggs, 1999). The low level of online discussion about course content was not surprising given that there was ample opportunity provided for such discussion in face-to-face lectures and tutorials.

The participation of students in interactions of this type demonstrated engagement both with the technology, and the course content. This was continued in the

Table 1. Instructor vs. student discussion posts

Discussion Topic	Number Total Posts	% Total Posts	Number Student Posts	% Student Posts	Number Instructor Posts	% Instructor Posts
Assessment Tasks	210	40	138	35	72	55
Introductions	144	27	133	34	11	8
Feedback	68	13	59	15	9	7
Informal Discussion	64	12	46	12	18	14
Notices	26	5	11	3	15	11
Course Content	9	2	5	1	4	3
Help Desk	8	2	5	1	3	2
	529	**100**	**397**	**75**	**132**	**25**

informal discussion area, which was used for discussing everything from politics and films, to asking questions about the exam.

The Assessment Tasks topic asked every student to choose a topic for their first assignment, and the topic and members for their group assignment. This was again easier than doing it in a classroom or tutorial format, as everyone could see what the others were suggesting, and there was no dispute over who got in first in choosing a particular topic. It also saved the instructor from having to write it all down, and kept track automatically of who had posted and who had not. This was a useful information management tool, and also helped in the process of familiarizing names and groups. It also allowed the instructor to follow up on anyone who appeared to be left without a group or not participating.

In terms of information management, use of the online forum provided a number of advantages to both the students and the instructor. For the students, it gave them a greater voice in talking to each other about the experience of block mode, and about the subject itself, as well as an outlet for those that might be isolated through not knowing other students enrolled in the course. For the instructor, it served as a vehicle to get to know the class, and documented examples of the issues of teaching in block mode. Overall, the online interaction was an aid to greater student engagement in the course and kept students involved in their learning activities between face-to-face teaching blocks.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING PARTICIPATION

Based on the online discussion forum interactions both in this case, and in comparison with similar online discussion forums discussed in the literature, a number of guidelines are recommended for improving student participation specifically in face-to-face block mode courses. Those of particular relevance to block mode teaching contexts are highlighted in bold type:

1. Introduce an online discussion forum as a supplement to face-to-face teaching.
2. As part of this initiative, setup an initial discussion framework prior to the commencement of block-mode teaching, with introductory posts by the instructor modeling the posts that students are to respond with.
3. It is generally best that the instructor sets up all discussion topics, otherwise students tend to start new topics without paying attention to topics that are already in existence. You can always add new topics later on if students request them.
4. Where possible, arrange for a tutorial session in a computer lab with all students, where they are introduced to the online discussion forum and asked to post their introduction to the rest of the class there and then. This overcomes the initial barrier of unfamiliarity with the technology, and allows the instructor to give immediate assistance.
5. Where introductions are being posted by a number of students at the same time in a computer lab environment, acknowledge all students individually, even if it is done within the one response. Students will notice if they are forgotten!

6. Unlike distance education courses which will have a lot of interaction in course content topics, block mode courses will tend to have more interaction in the social discussion topics unless they are specifically structured otherwise. Both block mode and distance education courses using web-based technologies will see a significant amount of interaction in topics related to assessment tasks. Take this into account by ensuring that both kinds of discussion topics are made available. If you want more online interaction around discussion of course content, then set this as a task for assessment.
7. Respond to all postings by students within 24 hours. This is important so that students remember what they posted, get immediate feedback, and do not feel disregarded. This does of course, mean that the instructor needs to schedule time each day to log in to the online discussion and respond to queries, and this should be taken into account in assessment of the instructor's overall academic load.
8. Have both formal and informal areas for conversation, and an area set aside for feedback.
9. Where feedback is posted by students, respond to each point raised, letting the student know that their feedback is appreciated, and what will be done about it.
10. Make participation in the online discussion forum a component of student assessment, so that students have a motivation to participate beyond it being a source of information.

CONCLUSION

In summary, use of web-based communication technologies can enhance the teaching of face-to-face block mode courses by allowing for interaction over an extended period of time, and increasing the depth of interaction. The most important issues to encourage student participation in such discussion forums are instructor interaction, timely response to student posts, provision of relevant information that meets the needs of students, and incorporation of an assessment component for the interactions.

The guidelines suggested are based on one example of teaching a face-to-face block mode course and need to be tested in a variety of block mode teaching contexts. They are suggested for use in conjunction with online discussion forums, but could be applied when using more recent and emerging communication tools such as wikis, blogs, write boards, and shared tagging (Alexander, 2006).

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