

Chapter 3

Using a Social Learning Community to Actively Engage Students' Participation in a Virtual Classroom

Fariel Mohan

University of Trinidad and Tobago, Trinidad and Tobago

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case describes an experiment to motivate first year university students to use a virtual classroom through social and academic interactions. This approach augments the virtual classroom approach with concepts from social networking to create a social virtual classroom. The aim of the approach taken was to determine if social media included in a virtual classroom can actively engage students' participation in social networking as well as be used as a tool for learning. Results from the experiment indicate that using a social virtual classroom encouraged social networking among the students. The social virtual classroom was also highly used for learning. The blend of social and academic in the virtual classroom engaged the students in creative ways that was not anticipated. A survey was conducted at the end and seventy-seven percent of the students agreed that the social aspect of the virtual classroom was intrinsically motivating.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) is a government owned university. UTT is a multi-campus facility with six major campuses offering certificates to post graduate degrees. The campus this experiment was conducted was at the Point Lisas Campus. UTT was established from a government owned institute, the Trinidad and Tobago Institute of Technology (TTIT). UTT's primary focus is to meet the needs of Trinidad and Tobago for a highly trained and qualified technological manpower base. UTT started in 2005 and offers a spectrum of educational opportunities where experiential learning programmes are incorporated into the traditional learning environment.

The vision of UTT is to be the National Institution of higher learning and research for socio-economic and technological development that:

1. Inculcates in the graduates a set of overarching skills—metaskills—that help them navigate the new and emerging technologies in the national and global contexts, and
2. Through its R & D activities, brings and keeps Trinidad and Tobago in the Vanguard of engineering and technology in niche areas of key importance, such as natural gas is to the nation.

The mission of UTT is to be an entrepreneurial university designed to discover and develop entrepreneurs, commercialise research and development, and spawn companies for wealth generation and sustainable job creation towards the equitable enhancement of the quality of life of all individuals, families and communities of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean.

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduction

The experiment described in this case investigates whether using social networking software to build a virtual learning community can actively engage students' participation in social networking as well as be used as a tool to support learning. Previously, an experiment was conducted by the author to study the effects of using technology in the teaching of a first year mathematics course at the UTT. In this experiment, a virtual classroom was introduced that made heavy use of *blogs* (Mohan, 2008a). This virtual classroom was used as a tool to enable students to explore, discover, extract, and share their knowledge with other students who were

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