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WHEN THE COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ISN'T ENOUGH

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INTRODUCTION

Many articles have been written extolling the need for interactivity in the online classroom. Zundel (2006) states that not only should interactivity be effectively integrated, but that it is essential for enhancing the learning in online courses just as interactivity is essential for on-campus learners. Mabrito (2004) contends that success is enhanced in online courses by engaging students as active learners rather than passive participants. Mabrito goes on to state that this engagement should include ample opportunities for students to interact with not only the course content, but also with the instructor and fellow classmates.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of the literature reveals multiple articles regarding online learning and the need the learner has for interactivity and collaboration tools. An example of this need stems directly from the growth of technology-based collaborative, team-based projects in business. A recent study (George, 2011) of 260 small businesses with 1,000 or fewer employees indicated one-third of the businesses increased spending in support of collaboration projects compared with expenditures the previous year, and only 15 percent cut spending. To fund technology needed for increased collaboration, 56 percent of businesses in the study expected information technology (IT) budgets to rise compared with the previous year,

and only 20 percent expected a cut. Schools of business preparing students to enter a work environment that increasingly depends on technology-dependent virtual teams increasingly use online learning to teach students team skills and interaction with team members; however, the higher education simulated environment often lacks the array of Web 2.0 technology tools needed to accurately portray virtual teams in the work place.

A common question asked by higher education instructors teaching in the online environment is, "How can I make my online class as interactive as my face-to-face class?" The problem faced by many online instructors is that they are expected to use a limited set of tools included in the course management system (CMS) or learning management system (LMS) to create opportunities for student interaction, group writing, and individual or group presentations that are equal in rigor and breadth to the opportunities provided students in the face-to-face environment. Sometimes, even sophisticated course management systems (CMS) do not offer the array of tools needed to provide cooperative, interactive components required for individual student learning or collaborative team editing in writing intensive courses.

The limitation of CMS tools is often overlooked by administrators, decision-makers, and other instructors who either choose not to use interactive synchronous or non-synchronous

learning tools or whose curriculum does not require group-based writing or business presentations. Though these experiences do present a challenge, this does not mean that these types of activities cannot be completed online; students, for the most part, are comfortable with using technologies not included in the CMS. The question often is whether the instructor is comfortable managing the additional technologies. For some faculty, online instruction itself is a challenge due to lack of technical mastery and teaching-style preference (Schoenberg, 2011).

de Pillis and Furumo (2007) found in a comparative study of 123 male and 78 female upper-division business students in virtual and face-to-face teams that learners in the virtual teams using only the WebCT course management system for collaboration “had lower average performance, less cohesion and satisfaction, more time spent on task, and more free-riders than face-to-face teams” (p. 95). Conversely, Hutchison, Kear, Robertson, and Woodthorpe (2010) conducted a study of students and tutors using wikis in place of formerly used forums for discussion, and the authors concluded that usability and sociability were key requirements of tools for interactivity.

Ubell (2010) wrote, “Education and training that take full advantage of virtual teams not only provides essential skills, but engage learners in one of today’s most advanced workplace practices” (p. 53). The author added, “Opportunities to introduce virtual teaming are no longer limited by clunky technical means....you now have everything you need on your desktop or in your hand to participate in engaged collaboration on the job or in the class”

(p. 54). Freely available open-source technologies are commonly used to augment learning management systems and improve information sharing; “teams have adopted wikis as collaborative websites, permitting members to add and edit content” (Ubell, 2010, p. 56).

Schoenberg (2011) suggested collaboration “creates a sense of belonging to an online community, promotes communication, encourages critical thinking and cooperation among students, and reduces or eliminates isolation” (p. 81), and he advocated using collaborative tools or technologies such as Google Documents, Skype, Facebook, wikis, blogs, and video. Furthermore, Dittman, Hawkes, Deokar, and Sarnikar (2010) studied the effect of virtual team collaboration training among selected undergraduate courses at a small Midwest university and found the training was viewed as useful by study participants, and the training increased collaboration and development of relational links with teammates.

Despite the business community’s growing emphasis on collaboration and use of collaborative technology (George, 2011), there are gaps in students’ exposure to, and ability to use, Web 2.0 technologies in higher education settings. Bennett, Bishop, Dalgarno, Waycott, and Kennedy (2012) conducted research across three Australian universities of students’ use of information and communication technologies to support their learning. Results of the study indicated most students had little prior experience with relevant technologies, and many struggled to see the value of using Web

2.0 technologies for learning and teaching.

In another 2012 study (Shea, Sherer, Quilling, & Blewett, 2012) of graduate students attending one university in the United States and students in their fourth year of study at a university in South Africa, Web 2.0 technologies were used to enable virtual teams to experience tasks similar to “a typically complex task conducted in global virtual teams today – focused and time-bound,” (p. 304). The technologies included neXtrovert’s discussion forum and wiki for collaborative writing and Skype for desktop video conferencing. Results of the study indicated 64 percent of the students said the project went “very well,” while 15 percent said it did not go well. Specifically, the students commented, “The wiki was a great collaboration platform – it’s nice to be able to add work, and edit the work of others, slowly molding and shaping text into a final product” (p. 307). Students also recommended more time be allowed for technical training, team introductions, and wiki development. Shea, Sherer, These authors noted many business students will likely be members of global virtual teams and also questioned how schools of business are preparing students to work effectively online, across time zones, and with other cultures.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

For the purposes of the present study, instructors at a mid-sized, four-year public university, devised assignments requiring students enrolled in writing-intensive business communication courses to use technologies not associated with the campus-supported CMS. Students received guidelines for

access to the technologies in the content of the course management system. These additional technologies included Wikispaces, YouSeeU, Dropbox, Blogger, Twitter, Facebook, Ning, and Second Life. For the purposes of this study, the discussion will focus on students’ use of Wikispaces and YouSeeU. Students were assigned a username and password and were enrolled in the Wiki by the instructor to streamline the process for participation.

Wikispaces is a free-for-educators, cloud-based technology that enables simultaneous editing of a document. This application was chosen because it was free, it allowed for team-based writing, and it provided course instructors a detailed log of document changes. Instructors must set up the account and certify that it will be used only for educational purposes.

The other technology to be discussed is YouSeeU. YouSeeU was used for individual online student presentations. YouSeeU was developed by a business communication professor to address the scarcity of methods whereby online students could conduct a business presentation that required the same considerations as those of students presenting in the classroom. YouSeeU has unique features that allow for better student presentations of data as well as better feedback from the instructor. This is not, however, a free service. YouSeeU was purchased on a subscription basis only for online students; the university’s additional fee for distance education courses covered the cost.

Purpose: The purpose of the presentation is to discuss student perceptions of using web-based tools for

interactivity and collaboration, as well as instructor perceptions of the issues encountered to incorporate these tools.

Procedures: The presenters have used a variety of tools to enhance the interactivity of their web-based offerings. A survey was developed to determine online students' prior familiarity and use of the online learning tools Wikis and YouSeeU. In addition, after requiring students to use these Web 2.0 tools, students were asked through the use of open-ended questions to provide their opinions of the value of these tools for the online class.

Findings: Students in online sections of business communication, administrative communication, and business communication technologies courses were required to use both Wikispaces and YouSeeU. Specific assignments, both individual and group, were made for the students to complete. Brief instructions were provided with the additional suggestion for students to study the online instructions for each platform. Assignments were different for the two courses, but included Wiki assignments for group collaboration on research and writing assignments and YouSeeU assignments for individual introductions, individual presentations, group presentations, and interview questions (the interview questions were set up like an oral exam in YouSeeU).

For this study students were surveyed to determine their prior experience with the two technologies. A total of 72 students responded to the survey. The respondents were 31% male and 69% female. When examining the knowledge and prior experience of recent students in the use of Wikis and the YouSeeU

platform, results indicated that 42 students (58%) had never heard of a Wiki before the class, and 63 (88%) had never heard of YouSeeU. When asked of their prior experience using these tools, 60 students (83%) had never used a Wiki and 63 students (88%) had never used YouSeeU. Of those who had used a Wiki or YouSeeU previously, the majority (67%) had used the tools in another online class.

Students were asked their opinions of the use of these technologies for the online class. The responses were generally very positive.

When discussing the use of Wikispaces, comments included:

- In the beginning it was confusing, but once I figured it out it seemed easy.
- I like how each assignment had its own discussion area so the conversations were kept separate from other assignments.
- I liked how the instructor could see who was posting so people got the grade they deserved.
- It is a good feature to use for classes because it does allow you the ability to get assignments done as a group when it is all online.
- Using the wiki for group work was a good experience and a great learning tool.
- Once familiar with the system, the technology became exceptionally helpful and the group efficiency rose tremendously.
- The site was very easy to use and navigate.
- Not having to email documents back and forth causing confusion on

which was the newest version was very helpful.

There were a few negative comments as well. These, however, referred more to team members' lack of participation.

When discussing the use of YouSeeU, comments included:

- It was exciting to visually do an assignment.
- It prepared us for future employment.
- The YouSeeU video was great practice for the interview question and practicing presentation skills.
- A benefit from using the YouSeeU technology was that we could see the other people in our class and know a little bit about them as well as the teacher.
- I am not a fan of making speeches in front of a class, so being able to record my presentation and then upload it was a better option for me.
- I enjoyed making the PowerPoints to go along with the videos.
- The interview question was a really good way to practice for an interview. The set-up of that oral exam was really good and even though I was nervous, I really liked that assignment.

The negative comments on the YouSeeU also had to do with the problems of group work in an online class.

For the instructors there were also pros and cons. Setting up the courses in a separate platform takes additional time. Fielding questions on software that the instructor does not have expertise in can be somewhat intimidating. There was some confusion on the part of the

students on exactly how to initially log in to each technology. For both of the applications discussed in this paper, however, instructors did find that students were, for the most part, self-sufficient once they initially accessed the technology's website.

In looking at student performance while using the tools, instructors felt they had more control in terms of understanding the amount of work performed by each student. In addition, some instructors commented that they felt the work submitted was of better quality than they had previously experienced with similar assignments in the same classes. All of the instructors who tried the two applications (Wikispaces and YouSeeU) who reported in the study have continued to use the tools in their courses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of literature and the results of the current study, evidence seems to point to the advantages of adding additional avenues of interactivity to CLMs, or at least the CLMs of the participants of the study. This addition may provide enhanced interactivity not otherwise available for the course. Companies who design, manage, and sell various CLM products may not be aware of the needs for such interactive components.

The recommendation of this study is for educators to consider adding an additional tool to their current online course that will enhance interactivity. It is also recommended that faculty use the technology in cohort fashion to provide peer support when questions arise. In addition, it is recommended that those

responsible for working with the CLM companies discuss the various additional tools that are being used by their faculty. Having this conversation with the representatives who serve the campuses might be a step toward adding additional features to the traditional CLM.

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