Motivating Dialogue

Web-based Discussion Forums for Interactive Teaching & Learning

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Presentation Outline

- Technology and teaching goals
- Teaching through dialogue
- My course on WebCT
- Student feedback on WebCT
- Stimulating Dialogue
- 3 Forums: Successes and Difficulties
- Conclusions
- Your Questions / Comments / Feedback / General Discussion

Technology and teaching goals

- If web tools are the answer, what is the question?
- The web and class-room interactions: substitutes or complements?
- Four models of web-use in teaching
  - Model 1 - Web used only to disseminate info / course administration
  - Model 2 - Mainly classroom activities, with some on-line activities to complement or support
  - Model 3 - Most learning activities are conducted on-line
  - Model 4 - All course activities conducted on-line

Advantages of web

- Chief advantages of the web are related to flexibility: time, location, content
  - Ease of dissemination
  - Student-self access
  - Makes course structure transparent to students
  - Extend time for dialogue / asynchronous communication

Pedagogical uses of dialogue

- Dialogues entail various exchanges: of information, Q&A, and also of questions.
  - Students formulate questions, and possible answers
  - Students learn iteratively
  - Students "learn by teaching" (peer-assisted learning)
- Challenges: passive learning, fear of being wrong, emphasis on marks.

Overview: My Course & WebCT

- The course: International Relations
- WebCT – major elements
  - Syllabus Information
  - Lecture Outlines
  - Simulation Exercise Information
  - Calendar / Latest Announcements
  - Student Records
  - Discussion Forums

Student feedback on WebCT and on-line dialogues

- 11,606 hit count
- Students appreciate self-access
- 68% accessed from home
- Average time on-line: 2.4 hrs / wk
- Students like on-line forums
- 486 postings to all forums
- 54% asked for help via forums
- 90% learned from on-line discussion
- 98% learned from reading forums
- Overall, students appreciate web-based activities
- Yet, students still found face-to-face interactions and traditional learning methods most useful.

Stimulating Dialogue

- Web-based discussion forums
  - Question & Answer forums
    - Course Admin questions
    - Course Content questions
  - Homework forum
    - Submission of assignment and instructor feedback
  - Simulation Exercise forums
    - Students encouraged to post messages "in character"

Simulation Exercise Forum

- Goals
  - Enhance role-playing experience
- Positive outcomes
  - Some creative expression
- Difficulties
  - Limited participation
  - Minimal peer exchange
- Possible enhancements
  - Attach explicit credit?
  - Instructor stimulates communication via his own posting

Q&A Forums: Admin and Content

- Goals
  - streamline communication; provide supplemental information
  - foster autonomous learning & peer-assisted learning
- Positive Outcomes
  - well-used (84 & 112 posts) & referenced
  - encouraged student questions
  - positive dialogue, some peer learning
- Difficulties
  - some shyness / lack of anonymity
  - danger of substituting for reading
  - instructor's "shadow" discourages peer communication
- Possible enhancements
  - attaching credit? instructor silence?

Homework Forums

- Goals
  - foster research and writing skills
  - streamline submission
  - dialogue through instructor feedback, peer review
- Positive Outcomes
  - enthusiastic participation
  - separate feedback from assessment
- Difficulties
  - "data dump" / escalation of length
  - plagiarism
  - embarrassment / "text lacks context"
- Possible enhancements?

Conclusions

- Make web activities integral / some course assessment activities must be web-based
- Yet, do not allow web to substitute for other learning activities: students benefit from (and indeed prefer) other modes of learning.
- Prompt response is key to encourage student use for questions
- Use lots of praise
- Caution in use of language / "tone"
- Peer-assisted learning is difficult: encourage by praise or points?