Evaluating the use of forums to create an online dialogic space in blended learning (0305)

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Context of the study

Use of online discussion forums is widely adopted in higher education teaching. In addition to providing an extension to the learning environment, these are known to help develop higher order thinking skills (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). Forums provide an online cognitive space which foster dialogue and establish a sense of community among the learners. In the dialogic space, critical conversations occur at the level of connected 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer 2013) in collaboration with others. Learning often takes place in the process of purposeful dialogues with others. However, in spite of the multifaceted benefits of online discussion forums learner engagement has often been an area of concern for higher education practitioners. This paper presents findings of an empirical study conducted with a group of first year undergraduate students on a social science degree with a blended learning delivery model. Based on Garrison et al (2000) Community of Inquiry Framework, the paper presents findings which evaluate the use of online forums as a way to create a dialogic space in blended learning.

Methodology

The data for this study was collected using a questionnaire survey, focus group interview and analysis of students' online forum contributions. Students' online contributions were coded against indicators of the three types of presences as outlined in Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework – social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. The post course questionnaire survey was designed to identify students' conceptions of their experiences of learning in a blended learning environment interspersed with use of weekly online forums. The students were asked to respond to the five-point Likert scale questions. Open questions were asked following each Likert scale question to allow students to elaborate on their responses. A focus group interview was conducted in the middle of the term to collect their initial views on their learning experience.

Findings

The findings of the study have been analysed using the dimensions of online engagement as identified by the CoI framework.

Social Presence

There was a high level of social presence throughout the course of the online forum discussions which contributed to their satisfaction with online learning. Students felt 'a strong sense of community', 'a sense of mutual support and respect', and 'closeness' among group members. 'Friendships that transcend study' were formed. Students on the course were found to be very task driven but they identified themselves as part of community of learners who were striving towards a shared academic goal. Establishing group cohesion was a predominant part of initial forum discussions as the students recognised that to develop a meaningful cognitive presence, an effective social presence was a prerequisite.

Cognitive Presence

After establishing the mutual trust through social presence, students felt the asynchronous online dialogue provided them with a cognitive space to think, reflect and draw on the theories they learnt, and their personal experience to enhance their forum contributions. Many students preferred a sense of 'security' offered by the online learning environment as it gave them an opportunity to articulate their thoughts before sharing them with others unlike the pressured conditions of face-to-face discussions. Some students recognised that extensive online discussions and interactions with other students contributed to a deeper understanding of the subject, and provided them with a different perspective on the issues discussed. However, some students found the lengthy and extensively referenced online comments posted by some students as daunting and off-putting as they tended to formalise what they conceived as an informal space for dialogue.

Teacher Presence

The findings of this study reinforce the importance of the teacher's presence in online learning. Students recognised the importance of the constant encouragement, explicit guidance and instruction, and sufficient and constructive feedback both online and face-to-face from the tutor as an important factor in sustaining online dialogues. The tutor's role as a facilitator and their scholarly leadership was found to be indispensable in enhancing the quality of the dialogue. However, the teacher presence was measured so as to prevent infringing into what was meant to be a student led space for dialogue.

Implications of the study

The findings of the study are of importance in informing the design and delivery of blended learning courses which involve use of online forums. At the beginning of the course, a shared understanding needs to be developed among students regarding the benefit of the online dialogue with peers in extending their social and cognitive space. Lecturers should only play a facilitator's role in the online discussions rather than taking over the discussions. In order for online discussions to take place and an effective online dialogic space to be developed, the benefit and rules of engagement need to be recognised and accepted by all stakeholders.

References

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