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Using Web 2.0 Technology for Problem Based Learning in Nurse Education

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Abstract

Web 2.0 technologies, such as wiki pages, have the potential to facilitate the formation of on-line communities of learning, especially useful when participants in that community are geographically dispersed and living in remote areas. This poster describes the authors' work with undergraduate health studies students tasked to work collaboratively on a problem-based learning (PBL) project in which the students use wiki pages to share ideas and resources.



Table 1. Average number of student visits and (revisions) to group pages per student, per week of activity

Group / Number	Average Number of visits (revisions) (Per student, per week)				
	1	2	3	4	5
A	12 (2.3)	13 (2.6)	13 (2.7)	13 (2.7)	9 (1.9)
B	6 (1.5)	8 (1.5)	11 (2.0)	17 (3.1)	n/a

This data indicates that, on average, students in both study groups were making 1.5 visits to their individual group pages per day with just fewer than 20% of these resulting in a page revision. This high level of activity contrasts with that reported by Kennard (2007) in his study of wiki usage, who reported 'low' use of such pages in his group of postgraduate students. Kennard (*ibid*) also suggested that the 'number of times students altered page content may reveal the extent to which wikis provide an opportunity for deep, rather than surface learning.' Simple quantitative analysis of the degree of alteration or addition to page content cannot, of itself, be a measure of the quality of learning experience; more refined analysis is required if we are to develop an understanding of the role of social interaction and group dynamic involved in establishing on-line communities of learning.

PBL 2nd & 3rd year students are exposed to problem-based scenarios; these are designed to promote autonomous learning by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning (Ousey 2003). This is done by the identification of the student's own learning needs in relation to the problems highlighted within a weekly PBL scenario. PBL classes are timetabled for one day a week over six weeks. Each week the students work in small groups and each group is facilitated by a nurse lecturer. The lecturer's role is purely advisory and students are encouraged to work towards a consensus position.

Language: does assessment alter context?

It has been recognized that social groups use language that is particular to their context (Maass, 1989), so one should not be surprised when students adopt language and behaviour that they perceive as appropriate to their given context. This study examined whether changing context had a significant influence upon student language; one group were not assessed on their wiki contributions whilst another group were assessed; this shift in context was tempered by the fact that students were aware that tutors had access to, and moderation rights, to their discussions. What emerged was surprising; students being assessed adopted the formal 'classroom' style of language whilst those groups not assessed uniformly used informal language reminiscent of instant messaging or SMS style. Typical of the postings made by the non-assessed group are:

'c u tomorrow' - see you tomorrow
'hope u are all happy' - hope you are all happy
'Dus any 1 no' - does anyone know

Typical postings made by the assessed group, in contrast, include:

- I looked at unusual posture; I found an article that stated that people that suffer from catatonia often suffer with unusual posture and
- Some very interesting points, I guess we have to consider whether the benefits are to the 'system'

By changing the context from non-assessed to assessed, it seems that students acquiesced to the style of language 'expected' of them within the formal setting

Conclusion

Emerging technologies offer the potential to engage geographically dispersed student populations in reflective and constructive debate regardless of location or time. The role of assessing such conversations within the overall objectives of encouraging deep learning has been explored; it seems that, whilst tutors would wish to follow, and assess, the process, the actuality of collaboration and, hence, deeper learning, may be best served by allowing students to explore such aspects free from assessment. Students, it seems, welcome the opportunity to debate and discuss complex issues on-line and, whilst they welcome tutor observation of their conversations, these conversations are far richer when they are not assessed.

Wiki pages enable those students who, perhaps through geographical location or personal characteristics, find it difficult to attend face-to-face meetings, to contribute constructively to projects that involve a degree of collaboration. Some students prefer to meet face-to-face but the vast majority feel that the using a wiki improved their ability to share ideas and resources. Our use of wiki pages is not as a replacement to conventional meetings but as a supplement. Furthermore, by observing the discussion between students, one had the opportunity to evaluate the process of collaboration rather than just the product.

Future Work

We plan to extend our use of wiki pages to other subject areas and to compare wiki use with other forms of e-communication for collaborative projects. We are also exploring the use of secure social networking.

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