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OPEN LEARNING SYSTEMS

The Independent Voice of Open Learning

Established 1980

ISSN 0269-9729

Issue 69

SEPTEMBER 1999

Conferences to Come
and
Conference Reports

Students have
Communities
On-line



DL and
Telephone
Charges

Adult/Senior
Learners

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Technology with a
Face and Voice

Intranet
Statistics

WAOE
Steve McCarty

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Published by GSSE, Gilwern, Abergavenny
Printed at The Old Bakehouse, Abertillery

Intra-university Distance Education: The Added Impact of Collaboration

If properly structured, Can there be an aggregated value to a Collaborative intra—university graduate course offered at a distance? What technologies lead to a Collaborative learning environment between graduate students at each university? What supporting structures or methodologies ensure student success? I'm looking at these questions from the perspective of a first year instructional technology PhD student taking a graduate course at a distance offered between 2 American universities.

The course (Trends & Issues in Instructional Technology) was jointly offered at *Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University* (VT) and *The University of Georgia* (UGA). The instructional technology faculty at both universities had an established relationship and extensive developmental dialogue prior to the delivery of this course, but this was the first collaborative intra—university graduate course in instructional technology at Virginia Tech.

The notion was that (by utilising appropriate collaborative technologies and instructional design methods) students from both campuses could effectively interact with faculty and students from the partner university. In effect, the collaboration was a synergistic relationship since students from each campus were able to work with, and learn from, some of the United States' leading scholars in instructional technology.

Course Structure

An informal, volunteer face—to—face meeting was scheduled for students from both universities prior to the course. Several students and faculty from Virginia Tech drove down to UGA for an international conference in visual literacy, which also served as an opportunity for the Virginia Tech IT graduates to meet UGA IT graduates in an academically relaxed atmosphere.

Toward the end of the course all the students and several faculty members from The University of Georgia traveled to Blacksburg, Virginia for the face—to—face presentation of final group collaborative projects.

The course was designed with both synchronous and asynchronous components.

Synchronous

This component involved a weekly meeting of 3 hours where faculty from both universities would alternate leading a discussion. The talk always centred on a particular instructional technology topic related to the respective faculty's area of expertise. Weekly assignments prepared for the

synchronous learning time, with article readings and the development of questions for discussion.

Asynchronous

The asynchronous exchanges involved on—line threaded discussions over a variety of topics. This feature was used extensively between students to review submitted work (book reports), or reflect and comment on prior discussions and themes posted on—line.

Student Assignments

There were both individual assignments and group collaborative work. Individual assignments centered on

- Read weekly article postings (PDF formatted files) and develop questions for synchronous discussion;
- Read an instructional technology book and generate a book report synopsis (posted for student discussion);
- Select, justify, create and present a final project that could be chosen from a posted list of projects. The final project could also be collaborative if so desired.

Group assignments involved collaboration between students from each university and were self—selected by student teams. These group projects focused on an elaboration of the Current Trends & Issues' discussed throughout the course. A face—to—face presentation by each group completed the collaborative experience.

Technologies Used

Several types of collaborative hardware/software were used to bridge the distance between the universities. WebCT was employed for class management and Internet—based discussions. A VTEL videoconference hardware system was used for high fidelity synchronous communication.

WebCT

There was a steep learning curve for WebCT. The calendar features, while easy to use, was not completely

intuitive. To select a particular class date it was necessary to select the numeral in a particular monthly box to see an expanded explanation of assignments for a specific day.

It also took time to learn the navigation functions of WebCT's threaded discussion structure (posting, replying, searching, show all messages, show unread messages only). The on—line help was sparse and no self—paced tutorials were offered. The realtime chat features, however, were intuitive and easily discernible for first time users.

Class assignments, article postings, homework submission, synchronous online chats and asynchronous threaded discussions were organised via WebCT. The University of Georgia maintained and updated the content of the course's Web site. Typically, after using the VTEL videoconferencing system for 1 hour of weekly communication between both sites, students would then go to WebCT and use the chat feature to further discuss weekly topics of concern.

We would split into 4 chat rooms, each limited to no more than 7 participants. A weekly moderator would float between all chat rooms providing assistance if needed and redirecting the discussion if off topic.

On reflection, I think a moderator for each chat room may have provided more structure and, having a more directed purpose (other than just a general discussion of this week's topic) may have facilitated a deeper processing of the learning. The WebCT chat feature was very valuable for small group planning and for planning the intra—university collaborative projects. Group teams also made use of conference telephone calls, email and Microsoft's NetMeeting collaboration software.

VTEL

VTEL videoconferencing software was used for real—time communication between sites. Dual send and receive monitors provided visual feedback, with acceptable full duplex (2-way simultaneous) audio.

Technical support was on hand at each site to bridge the initial call. Students took turns moderating the synchronous VTEL sessions, both in leading student discussions and with the selection of images transmitted.

The VTEL system is managed by an icon—driven touch pad and is highly intuitive to use. The student moderators needed only 15—20 minutes' practice to become proficient in manipulating the touch pad selections. Each site had control over what their cameras—what they focused on and projected to the receiving site. If the remote site could control the presenting site's cameras this may be more like real life.

UK readers might like to work out how long the students on the VT/ UGA course spent on—line and then estimate the cost we would build up for the telephone calls—even at local, reduced rates.

Would such a programme be viable in this country?

Reflections

This course was a valuable learning experience from both a pedagogical and technological standpoint. Hands-on practice and experience with both the VTEL and WebCT systems provided awareness to each system's strengths and limitations. Current and relevant issues in instructional technology were presented in a meaningful (otherwise unattainable) way by utilising DE technologies.

What stood out for several students was the value of effective instructional design methodologies incorporated throughout the course. When operating at a distance it becomes imperative that ample structure, clear outcomes, plenty of practice and student support be provided. This experience, as I begin my second year as a PhD student in instructional technology, is one that I consider extremely rewarding.

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