Chapter VIII

Developing Evidence-Based Criteria for the Design and Use of Online Forums in Higher Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This chapter describes the evaluation of 13 educational online forums. The forums were classified into structured or free, and teacher-centered or student-centered forums according to the learning designs used to prepare the tasks and the style of online interactions. The study provides empirical data across multiple online forum experiences to better inform the pedagogy of using online forums. Findings are that structured forums generally have a higher quantity and quality of postings than free forums, and that student-centered ones also tend to be more effective than teacher-centered ones in encouraging quality online discussion. Further, through
analyzing the evaluation feedback from students and teachers in these cases, the study has identified three key factors that tend to affect forum success—ease of use, clear facilitation, and motivation to engage. The centrality of the role of the teacher was confirmed.

Forums in Online Learning Communities

Online community broadly refers to a community that has some kind of online presence (Preece, Abras, & Maloney-Krichmar, 2004). In general, online communities have characteristics that include:

• a defined community membership, as members usually demonstrate some legitimate interest before participating (Lave & Wenger, 1991);
• the asynchronous nature of computer-mediated communications (CMC) (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978);
• an extension of community membership, as members can be physically distant and geographically dispersed in an online community (Zhang & Storck, 2002);
• a capacity for rapid dissemination of ideas (Markus, 1994); and
• the possibility of revealing a more holistic picture of the topics under discussion through the cumulative contributions of each member (Zhang & Storck, 2002).

A closer look, however, reveals that online communities are indeed very varied, especially in the purposes for which the communities have been established and the technology used. One of the main purposes of online communities is related to communication between members of a similar profession (often called communities of practice) (e.g., Zhang & Bascelli, 2005), while another main purpose is for the maintenance of communities “that support interest groups such as dog-owners, gardening, football, bridge, and book” (Preece et al., 2004, p. 4); these are known as communities of interest.

The focus of this chapter is the use of online communities for learning purposes (learning communities) (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999). Online learning communities often claim to be aligned with a social constructivist perspective of learning (Farmer, 2004) in which learners use the contributions of other members to construct for themselves an understanding of a given topic (Zhang & Storck, 2002). It is claimed that the unique features of online communities bring in new qualities that are fun-
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