Chapter 8
Online Discussion and E–Mentoring Strategies in Blended Continuing Education Courses

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes online discussions in a course portal that supplemented class discussion in three continuing education courses. Our student groups were full-time professionals who studied on a part-time basis. We use and adapt some elements of Henri’s model for content analysis to quantitatively and qualitatively analyse the online discourse (Henri, 1992). Transcript content analyses show that students’ messages were on-task, thoughtful, and indicative of student-initiated learning and a good amount of peer help. While other studies have studied effective discussion through similar forums or computer-mediated instruction, we emphasize the role of the e-mentors in promoting and mediating the discussions. We discuss factors that contributed to the effective use of the discussion forums for fostering learning, including e-mentors’ enthusiasm in responding to the messages, and e-mentoring strategies. We also induce several strategies adopted by the e-mentors in facilitating online forum discussions.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we analyze online content arising from student discussions in a Knowledge Portal (KP) which supported three postgraduate courses in an institute that typically consist of both classroom and online components, i.e., they are blended learning courses. Our student groups were full-time professionals who studied for a Masters in Software Engineering (SE) or Knowledge Engineering (KE) on a part-time basis. To support student-student and student-instructor online interaction outside of the classroom, a number of collaboration features are provided, such as an online discussion forum, chat room, protected folders, group space and content...
access tracking in the portal. We collected a variety of evidence regarding the usage of the portal, in particular that of the discussion forums.

As Guzdial & Turns (2000) noted, simply making a discussion forum available does not mean that it will be used effectively to enable learning. Guzdial, Ludovice, Realf, Morley & Carroll (2002) did an extensive use of their CoWeb collaboration tool in a variety of Math, Engineering and Computer Science courses. CoWeb supports anchored collaboration which is an online discussion. The researchers pointed to a variety of causes for lack of collaboration, including too much competition, a sense of learned helplessness, and faculty issues.

Our study aims to contribute to this discourse. In particular, we study the role of e-mentor facilitation of the online forums for an audience of students who typically are very busy because they also hold full-time jobs. We are especially interested in studying e-mentoring and assistance to analyze online e-mentors’ interaction styles, such as social and cognitive acknowledgement, questioning, direct instruction, modeling, and encouragement and facilitation of discussion. Not many of the studies of online content analysis focus on the roles and strategies played by the online instructors or e-mentors. Doing a content analysis, we induce several e-mentoring strategies adopted by the course e-mentors in facilitating and promoting online discussions. Our research questions are:

1. For the adult students of the blended learning courses supported by KP, what are their participatory attitudes and their posting patterns on the online forums on the KP?
2. What are the online forum facilitation strategies exercised by the e-mentors of the KP that are not only theory-grounded but are efficacious in being able to boost the quantity and the quality of the students’ postings?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Frameworks for online analysis of online activity abound in the literature (Blake & Rapanotti, 2001; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001). As online collaborative learning proliferates, there is a need for evaluation and instructional frameworks that will help researchers, educators, and policymakers evaluate students’ online collaboration. In a review of research methodologies in online collaborative environments, Henri (1992) has developed one of the most sophisticated cognitive analysis models for online interaction. She delineated five dimensions related to the quality of the messages:

1. The quantitative posting rate of the participants.
2. Content that reflects the social dimension of conference interchanges.
3. Content relating to the interactive dimension of the conference.
4. Content indicating the application of cognitive skills.
5. Content showing metacognitive skills.

In our context, the Henri (1992) framework was chosen to evaluate the effectiveness of the online discussion group because it allowed for analysis of a range of aspects of an online discussion, the level of participation in the form of usage statistics, the nature of the interaction between contributors, and an indication of the learning process through an analysis of the cognitive activity evident in the message content.

Hara, Bonk & Angeli (2000) analysed online discussion in an applied educational psychology course in which they adopted the technique of getting students to be a “starter” and “wrapper” of discussions. A starter is supposed to read the material so that she can explain it to the others and foster the discussion, while the wrapper is...
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