

A dilemma beyond discussion – Increasing student interaction in external study modes



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A prerequisite for many postgraduate business courses is a number of years of work experience. This enables the lecturer to utilise the varied experience of the student group in the classroom environment and in group assessments to cover topics in greater depth and from a variety of perspectives. However there may be fewer options for utilising such varied experience when a large proportion of students study externally. In a learning environment that often offers only solo learning opportunities and individual-focused assessment, external students may have less access to the benefits of shared experience in classroom-based discussions and group assignments.

How do we ensure that external study options provide an opportunity to make use of the rich and varied experience of the student group?

At the Curtin Graduate School of Business we currently utilise weekly or monthly online discussion groups to enable external students to interact with each other within a unit. It is not evident, however, that these discussions are able to replace the depth of learning that can occur in other forms of interaction, such as group project work, where students are required to extensively research, debate, and integrate various perspectives, producing a combined piece of assessable work, and working through the group dynamics of a project team. We are interested in exploring other ways (besides on-line discussions) to achieve greater interaction and access to student experiences, in order to provide richer learning opportunities for all students involved.

The basic dilemma we therefore face is:

- *How do we ensure that external study options provide an opportunity to make use of the rich and varied experience of the student group?*
- *And a related question pertinent to all university staff is certainly:*
- *Do these options have to involve costly technology?*

Interaction and external study

Traditionally, distance education has been conducted using the correspondence method – a package of paper materials and a textbook is sent to the student, who completes the readings and various activities independently and provides written reports or findings to the lecturer. According to Porter (1997, cited in Hopper, 2001), the efficacy of correspondence courses is in large measure determined by the ability of the learners to work independently and stay on task. Such a process places a strong emphasis on the application of the student's own experiences to the course content.

However one of the benefits of studying a post-graduate business qualification such as the Master of Business Administration (MBA) is the exposure to a wide range of business perspectives, not only from faculty, but from other MBA students. This in turn can lead to the development of a network of close relationships with fellow business professionals (Greco, 2001), as students discover business and/or personal interests in common.

The independent nature of distance education may hinder the development of close relationships with fellow MBA students. In terms of social cognitive theory, it is the immediacy of interaction between students (LaRose, Gregg & Eastin, 1999) and peer groups in face-to-face interactions that can provide and return social and status dividends. Such immediacy, facilitated in the face-to-face classroom, is hard to match in distance education, and leads, in some cases, to feelings of isolation for those studying externally.

From an androgical perspective, there are other advantages of providing increased student interaction. Making full use of the wide and deep experience of the MBA group can enable lecturers to flesh out critical viewpoints on a business topic. Students can understand how topics have been covered in other industries and by other professionals, whilst at the same time, engaging in a dialogue on ways to improve experience.

The use of the Internet as a technology to improve the teaching options for distance education may provide some solutions to the lack of interaction and the feeling of isolation experienced by many external students. Yet, according to Cahoon (1998) students can equally experience frustration at an online environment of text-based instruction lacking in social considerations. Furthermore, the lack of social cues in communication can have disadvantages when interaction *is* called for (Diener, 1979) and can lead to miscommunication and incidents such as flaming.

Surprisingly the usage models of new technology for educational purposes, according to Tinker (2001), do not necessarily address the issue of interaction. He notes that popular educational uses of technology, such as the online lecture and the correspondence course models of distance learning using the Internet, fail to provide for the effective learning strategy of student-to-student collaboration. Tinker recommends the use of asynchronous discussions and group problem solving (with a skilled facilitator) in order to facilitate student-to-student interaction. It is the goal of increasing student-to-student interaction that we are now trying to achieve at the Curtin Graduate School of Business.

Discussion groups

One common method of increasing student interaction is the use of periodic discussions to understand various topics. Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest breaking into small groups for synchronous discussion in order to increase interaction, whilst asynchronous discussions are preferred by other authors (e.g. Tinker, 2001). However, unless structured appropriately, these 'conversations' can lead to little consolidation of an issue. Little research has as yet been conducted on the quality of interaction engendered by these discussion forums, although Kezsbom (2000) does suggest that a degree of social discussion at the start of virtual work increases trust and a feeling of a 'virtual community'.

Is the online discussion therefore simply a forum for students to provide their own experience without taking account of others? In this case, interaction becomes 'read what everyone else says, but write what you think', rather than a genuine effort at achieving consensus or taking account of other's opinions in discussion. We have found at the Curtin Graduate School of

Business, that this can be the case where students feel they have little need to take account of other opinions. A critical question in using online discussions as a basis for increasing student-to-student interaction is therefore: How do we craft discussions such that the range of experience in the discussion group is utilised in the most effective way, when students are unable to meet face-to-face?

From our experience at the Graduate School, we can suggest a number of pointers to aid the depth of discussion and incorporate student experience effectively in online discussion groups. First, and perhaps most obviously, we suggest that students *are required* to comment on other students' comments in discussion groups. One technique we have successfully used is to link a percentage of the unit mark to the contribution in the discussion forums. Students are required to write at least a 50 word comment of their own, and to answer the comments of at least 2 other students. This ensures that first and foremost, students actually interact with each other in the online course. Without any interaction at all, the goal of utilising student experience within that interaction is unlikely to be achieved.

Research by Lipnack and Stamps (2000) suggests that interaction will be deeper and more useful if there is a degree of social capital amongst members and a social framework within which online collaboration takes place. This is built into the start of the online unit at the Graduate School. We insist that students provide a profile of themselves, including their work experience and their non-work activities before the unit begins. Again, completion of this profile goes towards the overall mark for the unit. We also ask for an initial discussion of what the students hope to get out of the unit itself – what information are they seeking, what are *their* learning objectives? This allows the lecturer to tailor the unit if need be, but, more importantly, provides the student with an opportunity to develop a 'personality' online, as well as ensuring that students know how to utilise the software to contribute appropriately online. By contributing socially to the online discussion, fellow students are able to put the comments of their colleagues 'in context' – they are able to interpret comments to specific topics with some knowledge of the background from which these experiences were developed.

Finally, the role of the *facilitator* is paramount, in consolidating or provoking critical discussion from the points raised. As noted by Hopper (2001), the teacher-centred way of teaching does not lend itself technically to Internet course delivery and supports a constructivist paradigm of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, according to Schutte (1997, cited in LaRose & Whitten, 2000), the effectiveness of his web section was based on the students forming study groups due to the lack of interaction with the instructor. Whilst study groups themselves may be useful, the interaction with the lecturer is essential in order to ensure that topics are covered in adequate depth, and that opinions and experiences are considered as a whole, rather than one by one in a linear (threaded) fashion.

Beyond discussion

In our experience of online discussions, there is an important aspect of student interaction often missing from the discussion group – this is a sense of group dynamics. Although threaded discussions provide some interaction, in that students must comment on the comments of others, the threaded discussion can nevertheless lead students to provide separate comments at their own leisure, rather than the interdependent collaboration associated with teams working together to achieve a goal or complete a task. In a linear, threaded discussion, the responsibility is often on the individual to comment, rather than the group to come to a consensus or consolidation of opinion.

A second technique is useful here - having the students as a group *come to a decision* regarding a particular topic forces students to consolidate their opinions in order to achieve an overarching goal, a key aspect of team work. In working as a team, suggest Hitchings and Harper (2001), students can break the isolation of distance education, forming closer bonds between team members. According to Cascio (1999), virtual teams by their very nature require real interdependencies between team members, as well as a definition of roles and a clear leadership structure.

Discussion groups, then, unless well structured, with a specific group task to be achieved, can have their flaws in achieving the goal of increasing student interaction. At the Curtin Graduate School of Business, we are now looking at opportunities to move away from online discussions, towards processes and activities that offer closer collaboration between students. One of these options is the concept of the virtual team – in the case of one unit, a project in which external students are required to complete a case study together over a number of weeks, to be handed (or emailed in) to the lecturer. Other options include grouping internal and external students together in teams, in order to provide a closer link to the face-to-face community.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest that there is a transition from the campus classroom to the virtual classroom because of the different skills needed by students. We are well aware that this is likely to be the case, just as managers require different supervisory skills for managing virtual teams, so the team members require different skills in order to communicate with one another. However the dilemma we face is maintaining the benefits of the face-to-face community, with a group that meet only online. This paper has discussed briefly a number of ways to facilitate student interaction, with the aim of allowing an increased sharing of student experience. Hopefully, it has sparked some ideas in the reader's mind as to the way in which external students may be enabled to best contribute to their learning, and the development of relationships during their experience of post-graduate education.

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