USING LAMS CHAT AND FORUM TO PROMOTE QUALITY CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract

LAMS Chat and Forum were used to conduct in-class online conversations with second year university students to raise the level of engagement with their compulsory class texts. These discussions overcame students' reluctance to speak up in class, avoided the conversation being dominated by one or two of their classmates, could accommodate simultaneous small groups and moved the discussion to a student-centred activity. As LAMS Chat and Forum retains all previous history, students' contributions could be reviewed at any time and formally assessed. The marked improvement in the students' engagement with the texts has ensured the discussions will continue to be included in the program.

1. Background

For a number of years several tutors from the School of Education have been using face-to-face conversations in tutorials to discuss the set course readings. These readings are an eclectic mix of texts about the use of ICTs in education from a number of viewpoints and they were included in the class notes to generate active class discussion. Historically students have been given direction in the course outline as to which group of readings were to be discussed and when, but inevitably when the tutorial discussion began, it became obvious to the tutors that the students had either not done the required readings or had given them a cursory read at best. Obviously this had a devastating effect on the quality of the ensuing discussion.

However, it became obvious upon marking their final examination papers, that the students could read these articles without difficulty, understand their messages and effectively engage with them when they had to – if a mark was attached. Therefore, it was decided to trial assessing the classroom discussions in the hope that this would encourage students to study the readings as the course progressed, rather than just during the examination at the end of the course. The students would then have the benefit of this knowledge throughout the course which would enhance their understanding of course lectures and the quality of their other assignments.

When it was discovered that LAMS Chat and Forum retains all previous history, a trial was begun in which students' discussion contributions were formally assessed. The students in the trial ranged in age from 17 to 68 years and each student brought with them a variety of academic learning, life experience and cultural differences. In face-to-face class discussions, the student's identity often determined how their contributions were interpreted by other students. The online Chat sessions were designed so that the tutors could see each student's identity throughout the discussion but other discussion group members could not. When comments simply appeared as text on a screen, discussion contributions were taken on their own merit. The resultant anonymity of the online chat was particularly helpful in encouraging an increased acceptance of all students' views.

With the emphasis on verbal face-to-face discussion in this course in previous years, the tutors had an on-going concern that students of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) were being disadvantaged. Hence the move to include written discussions was of concern to the tutors who did not want to further disadvantage these students. The NESB students were carefully monitored during the early online discussions and they frequently made the comment that participation in the online chat sessions was often easier than face-to-face conversations. As one student put it, "I do not speak English well. I learnt English from a book. But in this class I can write what I think without worrying about how I sound."

Clearly, in-class discussions will always be more difficult for NESB students regardless of the medium, but many of these students performed more confidently when they could read other student's comments and take their time to reply.

2. The benefits of classroom conversation

Conversation can be a highly effective way of assisting students to build connections, both personal and intellectual, and of practising language in an authentic way. It encourages the establishment of a community of inquiry, which has been shown to be a valuable, if not necessary, context for a high quality educational experience.

People are social creatures who simply enjoy talking to each other and when it comes to learning, conversation can be a very valuable tool. Proponents of this theory include Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey and Wittgenstein. Discussion plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition and students learn from each other's scholarship, skills and experiences. Conversation organises, unifies and integrates many disparate aspects of student's behaviour such as perception, memory and problem solving (Vygotsky, 1978).

"Understanding grows as discussion grows" (Wittgenstein, as quoted in Rhees, 1998: 93). Students develop and clarify ideas during conversation. Disagreements with other students serve to effectively highlight alternatives to a student's point of view (Larson, 2000). As the resulting conflicts of opinion demand resolution, the students involved are effectively prompted toward higher-level solutions (Piaget, 1932). Dewey observed nearly a century ago that the educational process has two sides – one psychological and one sociological; and neither can be subordinated to the other. He also argued against the educational framework of memorisation and recitation and pushed for new methods to meet the changing needs of the newly emerging society (Lefoe, 1998).

When students own the knowledge rather than the tutor or the textbook, they become committed to building knowledge rather than merely receiving and reprocessing it. Knowledge building becomes a social activity, not a solitary one of retention and regurgitation. Hence, conversation becomes increasingly recognised as being critical to the learning process. Meaningful learning is less focused on transmission and more committed to negotiation and discourse. The creation of a learning environment that enables students to hear a variety of points of view and express and explore their own views, supports them in formulating their own opinions and allows them to apply their knowledge to problem-solving (Brookfield and Preskill, 1999).

3. Introducing the online in-class discussion

Some consider the lack of direct face-to-face interaction to be a freedom as participants are not distracted by the accents of participants, or by social games. They can disagree without arousing excessive emotion; they can debate without clashes based on conflicting personalities and shyer individuals don't have to "fight their way in" (Salmon, 2003: 28). However, that is not to say online discussions always lack passion. At times enthusiastic participants called out to their group members in the classroom and temporarily had a face-to-face discussion. Occasionally, tutors also had to remind students about online protocol and how easily the tone of the written word can be mis-read.

4. The challenges of classroom conversation

Discussions need to be planned and scaffolded well, and they are, of course, only one of a number of tools to be used to promote the students' learning. However, even well managed classroom conversations face challenges that were addressed using this approach of in-class online conversations:

- It is difficult for a student to feel his/her contribution is integral to the classroom discussion if they are one of 20-30.
- Students who are not confident English speakers and shy students are rarely heard.
- Students are not often given the time to make a considered response in face-to-face discussions.
- It is frequently difficult for the tutor to determine those students who are finding the concepts under discussion difficult to understand.
- The tutor is usually controlling the discussion and opinions that align with the tutor's own tend to dominate.
- An effective discussion can showcase students' deep understanding and engagement with a concept but due to logistical difficulties, they are unlikely to be assessed on the task. Therefore, a more formal writing task is most commonly employed.

How these challenges were overcome using in-class online conversations is discussed below.

4.1. Encouraging all students to contribute

When our previous face-to-face classroom discussions were monitored, it was found in any tutorial group of 20 students, only 4-6 students contributed regularly throughout the tutorial discussion. Some others occasionally made a comment but the remainder (the majority) sat quietly through the discussions. Attempts by the tutors to include 'the silent majority' by directing a question specifically to a non-contributor were often met with an embarrassed silence.

Inclusiveness is an issue raised by Brookfield and Preskill (1999) as a potential problem with classroom discussions. It is essential that everyone is able to contribute. We found the anonymity of the online Chat gave our quiet and shy students added confidence. As one student commented:

> Thank you for giving me a voice in this course. It is so great to have my thoughts heard. I am usually the quiet one sitting at the back of the class. By the time I have thought about what I want to say, someone else has already said it, or the conversation has moved on. Thanks again for giving the silent majority a go.

The expectation of participation differs significantly from the face-to-face classroom, where the discussion can be dominated by one or more extroverted students, giving an illusion that the class is engaged. The ability to think before responding and to comment whenever the student wishes helps to create a level of participation and engagement that goes much deeper.

4.2. Introducing small group conversations

A feature of the LAMS trial was that it allowed simultaneous small group discussions. As students were typing responses into their computers, it was possible to have four groups of five students active concurrently. This provided students with a much greater opportunity to contribute than the 20:1 ratio of previous class discussions.

However, with five group discussions operating at once, the tutor's normal role of discussion director was gone. Although LAMS allows the tutor to monitor what each group is doing, the 'mantle of control' had to be passed to the students themselves. By providing structured LAMS Chat sessions without an overt tutor presence, the tutors in the study believe the online discussions were not dominated by the tutors' beliefs or opinions but the students were given the opportunity to explore all aspects of the discussion question themselves.

4.3. Students are not given the time to make a considered response in face-to-face classroom discussions

A great advantage of text-based conversations is that it provides time for reflection. For this reason, written communication may actually be preferable to verbal communication when the objective is higher order cognitive learning. Some of the literature does, in fact, suggest that written communication is very closely connected with careful and critical thinking (Applebee, 1984; Fulwiler, 1987; White, 1993, as quoted by Garrison, 2000). It is suggested that it is the reflective and explicit nature of the written word that encourages discipline and rigor in our thinking and communicating. In fact, the use of writing may be crucial when the objective is to facilitate thinking about complex issues and deep, meaningful learning.

The decision as to whether to have only synchronous online discussions (all online in real time) or whether to also include some asynchronous online discussions arose. The pedagogical advantage of asynchronous online discussions is that students can take time to ponder the various points made, and can make their contribution in their own time (Laurillard, 2002). Asynchronous online discussions allow flexibility as the students control when and where they post and reply to messages. They can also create a collaborative learning environment where students interact by negotiating, debating, reviewing and reflecting upon existing knowledge and are able to build a deeper understanding of the course content (Wozniak & Silveira, 2004).

Whereas an asynchronous environment encourages higher-order thinking by giving students time to reflect and consider before responding, a synchronous discussion has the advantage of spontaneity and immediacy of response that also holds appeal for the tutors. A combination of both was trialled: An initial synchronous discussion in a computer laboratory where students could have their first experience of the software under the guidance of a tutor; followed some weeks later with an asynchronous discussion run over 10 days, and finally a synchronous discussion held under exam conditions at the end of the course.

Unsurprisingly, the quality and length of the postings was greater in the asynchronous discussions, but these lacked the coherence and fervent argument of the synchronous discussions. Both were successful in their own way and in the upcoming semester, it has again been decided to keep a mixture of the two.

4.4. Helping those students who are finding the concepts under discussion difficult to understand

In an online discussion in which every student is participating, it is very clear to the tutor when someone in a group is floundering. Often the students in the discussion addressed this themselves, but a timely comment from a tutor can often quickly clarify thinking. By offering timely feedback, a tutor can 'scaffold' higher order thinking, foster independent thinking and present alternative view points. This may redirect online discussion towards knowledge construction (McLoughlin and Luca, 2000). Timely questions, recommendations, comments and articulation of key concepts are strategies that online tutors can use to provide students with support.

4.5. Assessing the task

The students' responses during the in-class online discussions were of such high quality that it was decided to include them in the assessment schedule for the course, which until then had been weighted heavily in essay-style assessment. As LAMS Chat and Forum retains all previous history, students' contributions could be reviewed at any time and formally assessed.

Student contributions were marked within the context of the group discussion and were assessed for:

- logical argument;
- evidence to support their argument;

- how they interacted and engaged with their group;
- participation rate of each student (frequency and distribution); and,
- the overall quality of their work.

The time required to mark this assessment of three online discussions for a cohort of 120 students was unsustainable for the three tutors, so the assignment has now been modified to incorporate self and peer assessment, culminating in a formal summary that is submitted by each individual student. A more detailed description of the assessment process used in this task is outlined in Cameron, 2009.

5. Students' responses

With very few exceptions, students came to the discussion tutorials well-read and prepared to discuss the readings. The level of engagement with the readings and their enthusiasm for the topics when they were confident of the material was inspiring. A growth in the students' level of understanding was often witnessed during a discussion and many times a student's firm stance on a topic swayed after a healthy online debate with fellow students. In addition, the students were heard debating the various articles before and after tutorials, and questions at course lectures became far more insightful.

Therefore, to the course tutors, the in-class online discussions were a resounding success, however, students' responses were varied. In one of the synchronous discussions, a student wrote,

> Intensive writing is really good for learning … how much are we all writing at the moment, synthesising thoughts and having a great intensive interactive discussion!!! This is a good example, we have time to listen to each other and respond with hopefully well considered comments.

However, in the same session, another student wrote, "I think this forum just goes to show how superficial online learning can be. It's poisoning my experience of this assessment." The latter student also stated later she found the whole exercise quite confronting – she was not comfortable with technology and yet her responses were of a very high standard and she did well in the assignment. A number of students commented on the stress of having to type quickly to get their thoughts down during the Chat. Yet when faced with the question: Would you rather we replaced this assignment with an essay, the response from 98% of students surveyed was "No".

6. Conclusion

The online discussions held in this course led to a deeper understanding of the set readings and improved engagement with their content. Their use overcame many students' reluctance to join in the classroom discussions and avoided them being dominated by a small number of their peers. The use of the technology meant the discussion could accommodate simultaneous small groups and moved the discussion to a more student-centred activity. The quality of this cohort's work throughout the course confirmed the use of the online discussions facilitated student understanding and engagement of the course material. Using LAMS Chat and Forum improved the quality of in-class conversations within our tutorials.

There are several factors that may explain this result. The tasks were assessable, which is always a powerful motivator with students; the LAMS software was easy for students to use; most students were keen to take part in an novel assessment technique; and it was more obvious to both staff and peers when students were not familiar with the readings in a small group environment. Further research is planned to determine how each of these factors may have influenced these in-class online discussions.

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