

Promoting student autonomy and lifelong learning skills through WebCT discussion tool: A case of University of Botswana Communication and Study Skills unit

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Abstract

With the emergence of digital literacies, web based pedagogy has gained prominence in the 21st century in Universities the world over. Several research studies on online teaching confirm that it increases collaboration, interactivity and active learning of the learners. This paper shares first year students' experiences of using WebCT discussion tool to promote self directed and active learning. Findings show that students noticed that the discussion tool was engaging, motivating and helped them develop active learning skills. The conclusion drawn is that the WebCT discussion forum is a useful tool that can actively engage all students in learning therefore could be used to help develop students' autonomy and lifelong learning skills (LLL). For CSSU to realize its mandate it is recommended that more lecturers in the CSS unit engage learners in the use of WebCT communication tools especially the discussion forum in order to assist students develop among other communication skills; autonomy, collaboration and lifelong learning.

KEYWORDS: Students' autonomy, WebCT discussion forum, Communication skills, Self directed learning, Active learning, interactivity, Collaboration

Introduction and background

It is no longer sufficient to define literacy as the ability to read and write text in this 21st century. The concept of literacy now encompasses digital literacy and development of skills to use them effectively to meet the challenges of 21st century communication and learning skills. Advances in technology and the learning demands of the information age are changing the nature of learning. The fast pace of progress with which technology is developing in the 21st century requires learners to acquire learning literacy, that is, the ability to learn to teach themselves. (Stevens, 2007; Prensky, 2005; Morss, 1999). UB philosophy of learning and teaching is based on the principle of intentional learning, emphasising pedagogical strategies that encourage active learning and the development of self-directed independent learners who have learned how to learn (University of Botswana Teaching and Learning Policy, 2008). The Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) at the UB is mandated with equipping first year and post year one

students with academic and professional communication needs. The Learning and Teaching philosophy for the Unit is based on the principle of self-directed and active learning and promotes critical, creative, analytical and problem-solving skills for life-long learning (CSSU Learning and Teaching Philosophy). The focus of the policy is on skills development which is influenced by a transition from a resource-extractive economy to a knowledge-based one.

The course

The University of Botswana (UB), in its quest to be learner-centered and develop self-directed learners who possess critical thinking skills that will nurture a culture of lifelong learning (UB Learning and Teaching Policy, 2008), introduced General Education Courses (GEC's) in 2000/2001 to address cross-cutting issues as per employers expectations. The CSSU offers two 100 level courses, Communication and Study Skills 1 (GEC 111) and Communication and Study Skills 2 (GEC 112), which are core courses for all UB undergraduates. The general aim of GEC 111 is "to equip participants with essential communication and study skills that will enable them to become independent and self directed learners, and also ultimately function effectively in organisational and social environments"(CSSU student handbook 2007-2008: pg.8). GEC 112 aims to develop communication skills that focus on their use for specific purposes and immerse students in their various communicative situations to address needs and skills relevant to their various specialisms. Students contact hours are two (2) one (1) hour sessions per week which Instructors find very limited for a skill based course. Instructors in the unit usually feel rushed in class as they attempt to cover all the necessary topics. This leaves very little time for learners to practice and develop skills they are taught.

The majority of first year students are from a traditional classroom pedagogy background where they are used to an active and present teacher; teacher-directed activities and discussions and a passive or merely responsive role for students. Therefore, they cannot be considered to be independent learners capable of managing their own learning. CSSU instructors are challenged to meet the general aim of GEC 111 and to use pedagogical strategies that encourage the independent and self-directed format. Lecturers need to help students to develop skills of being independent and lifelong learners. This, therefore, calls for CSSU instructors to adopt innovative pedagogical strategies that will promote learner autonomy and empower our learners to be active and lifelong learners.

Web-based communication tools have been closely linked with aiding the development of learner autonomy. Several online researchers (Singh and Embi, 2007; Jonassen, 1999; Swan, 2001; Yumuk, 2002) argue that the two modes (synchronous and asynchronous) of WebCT discussion help enhance and support the development of autonomous lifelong learners because it promotes thoughtful evaluations, analysis and personal reflections. The asynchronous mode gives learners more time to reflect on their own ideas, which help develop critical thinking and learner autonomy (Little 1991; Prester and Moller 2001). Other online researchers (Singh and Embi, 2007; Woods and Baker, 2004) observe that WebCT interactivity assists in engaging students in active learning and encourages a greater sense of accountability among students. This increases the possibility of producing potentially autonomous and lifelong learners.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which the Discussion forum aids students to achieve learner autonomy and lifelong learning skills. The paper aims to show that computer based tools, more specifically the use of WebCT Discussion forum in blended learning context, can be used to assist students be active, independent and lifelong learners. The researcher presents students' and her experiences from teaching a year one communication and study skills course offered to Business students in semester one and two of academic year 2008-2009 at UB.

Literature review

Online learning is becoming popular in most educational institutions the world over because of its dedication towards promoting independent and self directed learners (Singh and Embi 2007). Learner autonomy has taken centre stage as the responsibility of learning has shifted from the teacher to the learner. Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy puts all the responsibility and decisions concerning all aspects of learning on the student. Within the constraints of conventional education system of Botswana, Holec's definition is not realistic since it appears to mean the handing over of control and responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of learning. Dam(2000) and Little (1991) look at autonomous learning as giving the learner responsibility to be intentionally and actively involved in his or her own learning, but the learning environment is created by the teacher. This definition accommodates the conventional education system such as that in Botswana since it does not exclude the teacher's input or remove his/her responsibility from the learning process. The student is given more responsibility for his/her own learning with the teacher facilitating and guiding the student (Chickering and Ehrmann 1996). Encouraging autonomy does not mean giving learners total control and responsibility, but rather providing opportunities on a continuum towards increasing independence for lifelong learning.

Learning can be viewed as a lifelong journey which gives meaning to our lives and keeps us growing mentally, physically, and emotionally. It is viewed as a critical element for successful participation in the contemporary age competitive work environment (Edwards et al. 1998). The European Report on quality Indicators of Lifelong Learning (LLL) (2002) sees LLL as "encompassing all purposeful learning activity whether formal or informal undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies". It is necessary for learners to be equipped with skills that will enable them to constantly update their skills because advances in technology and the learning demands of the information age are changing the nature of learning. The new millennium is marked with an ever-increasing need to learn new skills and develop new insights and understandings. In this age change is constant, knowledge and skills change from day to day, therefore the teacher's role cannot simply be to fill students with information but to teach students how to learn, unlearn and relearn (Toffler, 1980; Gachago, 2005; Klopfenstein, 2003). By teaching students to reflect on how they learn and by developing their skills to pursue their learning goals, students will be empowered to change from passive recipients of information to active managers of their learning and become educated people who are able to adapt to the rapidly changing world (Grow, 1996). The teacher's role, as facilitator, is to empower learners by promoting student involvement in learning, helping learners to develop skills that support learning throughout life, and helping learners to assume personal responsibility for learning. Several researchers (Prensky, 2005; Singh and Embi, 2007) have

argued that online learning environments have a major role in providing lifelong learning opportunities.

Theoretical framework

Active and self directed learning is underpinned by the constructivist theory (Jonassen, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978), which views learning as being an active and not an absorptive process. Constructivism though a theory of learning can inform pedagogy and instruction on learning online because of its focus on designing learning environments that are learner and knowledge-centered (Swam, 2005). Learner centered environments have been seen to support and promote autonomy, active and lifelong learning (Gonzalez and Louis, 2007) other researchers have stated that nurturing learning environments provide opportunities for students to engage in interactive and collaborative activities with their peers. Such environments have been shown to contribute to better learning outcomes, including development of higher order thinking skills (Paloff and Pratt, 2001). The role of the teacher in the constructivist environment is to facilitate, so that the student takes the centre stage to allow them to take control of their own learning. The use of online discussion forum has become known as a communication tool and an effective way of engaging students outside the classroom. Online Discussion Forum is an e-learning platform that allows students to post messages to the discussion threads, interact and receive feedback from other students and instructor, and foster deeper understanding towards the subject under study. Asynchronous discussion forums can be used for discussion of assignments and other assessable work as a collaborative tool for project groups. Several online researchers believe that technology in education should engage constructivist conceptions of learning (Jonassen, 1992; Strommen and Lincoln, 1992) to help teachers empower students toward greater autonomy.

Methodology

The study falls under action research (Bell, 2005). The methods used for data collection were students' questionnaires and WebCT student postings. The data was analysed using a descriptive method. The instrument mainly looked at respondents learner autonomy abilities in terms of being;

1. able to evaluate sources and their tasks,
2. critical thinking
3. making decisions
4. Checking, verifying and correcting themselves during their learning task.

The study

(a). The context

In 2001, the UB eLearning programme was launched to spearhead the introduction of ICTs to support its vision of developing a student-centred, intellectually stimulating and technologically advanced teaching, learning and research environment (University of Botswana, 2006). The focus on eLearning at UB is on a blended learning approach, in which various modes, methods and media (traditional and innovative) are integrated and organised for appropriate learning. The UB Information Technology (IT) department offers a compulsory GEC 212 Introduction to Computing course to all year one undergraduates' students. The Educational Technology Unit in

the Centre for Academic Development is responsible for e-learning in the University and orientates students and instructors to the online environment before they can engage on elearning. As opposed to pure online learning, in a blended learning scenario students still meet in face to face classes, but have access to online learning materials.

The University of Botswana has a traditional learning environment. Some lecturers in CSSU recognise the potential of eLearning to support more learner-centred approaches to teaching and learning which promote the development of LLL skills. The researcher is one of the lecturers who have embraced elearning. The majority of year one students are young, fresh from high school and full-time students.

The Task

Group projects, which constitute 30% of the course assessment in each semester, are used by instructors in CSSU in a bid to develop an array of communication skills, such as collaboration, co-operation, interpersonal and conflict resolution, which are critical to success in the academy and the workplace. The researcher introduced students to WebCT communication tools, specifically the Discussion forum, in the first semester August – November 2008. Participants for this study were 49 first year students. Nine groups with six members per group on the average from one business class were engaged in asynchronous discussions. The students were given an opportunity to select group members they wanted to work with using sign-up sheets under the WebCT group manager tool. The groups were given an option to choose a research project topic that they had to work on for six weeks from a range of topics provided by the researcher, or come up with their own topic which was relevant to a communication problem. Some of the topics given were;

1. Identify any communication problems at the university of Botswana between
 - a) students
 - b) students and lecturers,
 - c) students and administration (support staff)
 and suggest ways on how to improve them.
2. Analyse the study/academic environment at the University of Botswana.
3. Find out the role of communication between lecturers and students.
4. Critically evaluate student's dealings and interaction with the University of Botswana administration.
5. Critically analyse channels and modes of communication at the University of Botswana or Faculty of Business and make suggestions

In the second semester like in the first semester students were to choose an organisational problem and work on it as a group. Topics suggested were;

- Effects of global recession in Botswana
- Global financial crises
- Manufacturing Solutions
- The power of branding.

- Digital inclusion in business
- Investment opportunities in Botswana
- World class customer care strategies
- Diversification of the economy
- New initiatives for Botswana Tourism Sector
- Privatization in Botswana
- Price control
- Management in organisations

The students were expected to search for information, evaluate it and share with group members. They needed to discuss and agree on ideas, so group members' participation was essential for the success of the team. The discussion forum was designed to encourage students to come to a consensus on an agreed topic and content of the final project, initiate discussions and answer each other's questions, with guidance and encouragement from the instructor where appropriate.

Assessment

Students' value what is assessed and collaborative learning is more successful when it is valued (Swan, Shen and Hiltz, 2006). To encourage collaboration and participation assessment was used. This was done in line with an earlier study by (Swan, Shen and Hiltz, 2006; Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005) who suggested that assessment positively influences participation. A strategy used to motivate the students and to ensure participation in the group discussions was to explain the assessment procedure before they engaged in the discussions. This was also posted on WebCT so that students could always refer to it. The instrument awarded 5% to the group if all its members actively participated in the discussion. A full 5 % was awarded if all group members actively participated in the discussion by timely (within 24 hrs of posting), responding to each posting in a meaningful way. This was done by evaluating the quantity (minimum of six postings per week) and quality of postings by each member in a group throughout the six weeks. The quality was identified by clear statements of position, identification of points of agreement and disagreement with other students' postings, logical arguments and the group's ability to organise their ideas into a presentation to the whole class.

In the second semester individual participation for quantity and quality was awarded 5 marks. This was meant to ensure individual accountability and group interdependence and also to check whether giving marks for individual postings would make them more eager to participate. The assessment was based on timely posting that allowed adequate group discussion, postings that showed critical thinking on the topic of discussion and directing team members to suitable sources and postings giving feedback to other group members. The researcher played the role of the facilitator and only came in to encourage those who were not actively participating after viewing the performance report option for each student. The researcher monitored group progress by viewing postings of all group members and encouraged those who had not yet responded to do so through the send mail option.

Findings

The questionnaire was administered to a total of 49 respondents.

1. ability to evaluate sources

In accessing their ability to locate suitable materials, evaluate them for suitability and relevance for their topic respondents showed a moderately positive response of 62%.

2. Critical Thinking

Encouraging students' to think critically is a major concern in online discussion (Stein, et al., 2007). According to Lang (2000), critical thinking goes beyond simple exchange of information. It is a communication process that produces a gradually more sound, well-grounded, and valid understanding of a topic of issue, involves participants developing and examining their ideas as fully as possible, presenting them clearly and credibly to others, and examining and challenging the ideas of others. This definition was considered when evaluating the aspect of critical thinking. The results showed that 45 respondents (92%) indicated that the tool had accorded them the opportunity to think deeply on other students and their own responses. On the ability to reflect on own learning and other students responses the respondents indicated a positive 70% agreement.

3. Planning, making decisions and organising abilities

On their ability to make decisions the results indicated a moderate positive 51% response among the respondents. In terms of planning and organising abilities the results indicated a moderately positive (53%) response among respondents.

4. Active engagement

From a total of 49 respondents 38 (77.5%) indicated that they strongly agreed that the discussion forum had helped them actively engage in the discussions.

The overall results were positive for the development of abilities in critical thinking, active engagement and reflection whilst moderate on planning, organising, making decisions, locating and evaluating learning materials.

Analysis of findings

In this study, initial participation on the Discussion forum in the first semester was poor. Students seemed to lack motivation to participate. The few already motivated students were dominating the discussions. For example in one group of six students only two students were actively engaged with the third not putting much effort to look for information before asking for help from the other members or just agreeing with a team member without adding more value to the discussion as indicated by the examples below example.

Message

Subject: group h

Topic:
Integrated
Skills
Project

Author: Lethlare* (pseudonym)

Date: 15
September
2008
11:28 AM

guys its giving me a hard time on the problem of personality, mayb u can giv me a clue.

Message 28298452001

Subject: group h

Topic:
Integrated
Skills
Project

Author: Lethlare* (pseudonym)

Date: 15
September
2008 14:28
PM

Ok I agree with Nora* (pseudonym)

The other students started contributing after a lot of encouragement by the instructor, confirming some earlier research (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2003; Paloff and Pratt, 1999) that instructors need to play an active noticeable part as “cheerleaders” trying to motivate deeper learning. To obtain meaningful contributions from these unwilling students, constant guidance from the instructor was necessary. Not too much participation was required since this could reduce student to student interaction, creating needless dependence on the instructor (Paloff and Pratt, 2001). Initially, their comments did not reflect critical reflection, nor did they share with their peers their sources as indicated by examples above. Gradually, with constant encouragement from the instructor, the participation and quality of the discussions improved significantly. In the second semester students did not need constant encouragement to participate and the quality of their contributions greatly improved. The initial reluctance to participate might have been due to unfamiliarity with the tool or the feeling of some students that it increased their workload, as indicated in the comment below I was sent by one of my students.

Subject: RE: webct

Sent: 19 October 2008 12:26 PM

From: . T () Sejo* (pseudonym)

To: Ntereke, B ()(nterekeb)
CC:

webct is proving to be one good medium of communication between us as students and our lecturers but with the study timetables that some of us have as students its not often easy to find yourself visiting webct time and again.to add on, the computers are few so its often a first come fisrt serve thing, you come late...you are going to find a computer after some real hustle.

From the results it is evident that the discussion forum does help promote learners' willingness to participate actively in their own learning process. I had started them off on the road to attain independence – deciding on a topic –research-evaluate information – share with group members and decide on relevant information. Assessing individual participation acted as a motivating factor in the second semester. Students did not need to be encouraged to participate and their contributions were now more meaningful and showed some critical thinking. This supports (Swan, Shen, and Hiltz 2006) view that students value what is assessed, as earlier stated. The moderately positive response on planning, organising and reflective thinking indicates that our students lack these abilities and therefore need to be assisted to develop these skills. In the first semester some students complained that they could not find time to log on to the WebCT discussion forum because of workload and inadequate resources. This showed a lack of planning and decision-making skills. They needed to plan their daily activities and decide on a time when they could access resources without much competition. The assessment of individual participation forced the students to be more thoughtful in planning and organising. Now that it was not just a group mark individual students participated more and tried to make meaningful contributions.

Concluding observation

Since I introduced WebCT discussion forum in my classes in September 2008, I saw a steady increase in my students' willingness to participate actively in their own learning process. I observed that students' participation in WebCT Discussion forum provides them with opportunities for responsibility and lifelong learning. The forum helps develop active learning skills since individual students have to search for information, evaluate sources and make meaningful contributions. It facilitated and made it easier for the learners to cooperate and collaborate towards a common goal. I observed that for students to actively participate in the forum students initially need to be encouraged by grading individual participation. It is time consuming for instructors to evaluate quality of contributions, so it might be unsustainable in large classes, but quantity can be attained from WebCT performance tool. The asynchronous discussions might also take some time and make the discussions lose momentum because it is not in real time. It might take long before an individual is given feedback by group members. This can be minimised by the instructor encouraging students to plan to participate in daily online interaction and discussion. Monitoring the discussions and encouraging non-participating members is also time-consuming for the instructor. With the large numbers that instructors in CSSU teach, it cannot be sustained on a large scale. Instructors might have to scale down on monitoring and consider the group leaders to encourage their members as suggested by (Mazzolini and Maddison, 2002). Future research might investigate whether there is variation in postings and depth of threads if group leaders facilitate discussions. Also, students in this study received incentives in the form of marks for the number and quality of postings they made in the online discussion. Such an incentive may have motivated students to post more messages. Future research could examine cases where no incentive is used. Besides some of the challenges observed, members in the Unit are encouraged to assess group projects through WebCT as one form of assisting our learners to be autonomous and lifelong learners. .

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