LEARNING IN ASYNCHRONOUS ENVIRONMENTS FOR ON CAMPUS STUDENTS

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Abstract

Computed mediated conferencing (CMC) into asynchronous form, offers potential benefits for learning through its text based nature and space and time to reflect. The project investigates student approaches to learning (deep surface) and learning strategies, in this environment. The research is sited in a degree course where flexible learning models are available for on campus students. The relationship between CMC and face-to-face activity in terms of student learning will be a part of the research. The project takes a student perspective, which is explored through a case study design.

Context for the Research

The central role of the internet in the world, especially its communication capability, raises major issues for universities. How should graduates be prepared for this networked world? How can universities use the communication capability to improve the quality of learning outcomes?

Computer mediated conferencing (CMC) (Salmon, 2000) in its asynchronous form has two particular features which are beneficial to learning. These are the text based nature of the communication and space and time to think. Together these features have the potential to produce better and more careful development of ideas and deeper understanding (Hammond, 1998; Harasim, 1989; Garrison and Anderson, 2000). Neither of these features occur naturally in a face-to-face environment and for this reason CMC is potentially a good compliment for on campus learning.

Once the province of distance education, CMC is now being mainstreamed as universities blend face-to-face and online learning activities (mixed mode or flexible learning). (Taylor, Lopez and Quadrelli, 1996). A key issue is how students learn in this new environment. How does learning happen in an asynchronous environment and how is this learning affected by regular face-to-face contact with their peers and teachers?

Objectives of the Research

The purpose of the research is to investigate approaches to learning and learning strategies that undergraduate students in business use when they are working in an asynchronous environment in a course that uses a mixture of asynchronous and face-to-face activities. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which students interact with and use the identified features of CMC to develop their understanding and capabilities in their subject area. It examines this in the context of one kind of flexible learning environment ie on campus students learning through face-to-face and asynchronous activity.

Research questions are grouped in three areas and relate to

- Student approaches to learning in an asynchronous environment (eg how, student ideas about learning, deep and surface approaches)
- Student learning strategies in an asynchronous environment (eg what strategies, where do they come from, adaption and change in new environments)
- Relationships between asynchronous and face-to-face activity (eg impact of face-to-face contact, motivation, student value perspectives)

Methodology

Because the aim of the research is descriptive and explanatory, a qualitative approach will be taken. A case study design, (Bassey, 1999) will focus on undergraduate students enrolled in three selected modules using a blended approach of face-to-face and online learning. This design has been chosen because it supports investigation which is sited in the real world, and can address “complexity and embeddedness” and “discrepancy and conflict”, illustrate (Adelman, Kemmis, & Jenkins, 1976) on page 151 as well as multiple viewpoints and interdependencies and patterns. (Sturman, 1994, in Bassey, 1999)). Data for the case study will comprise...
CMC discussions, student interviews, systems data and secondary information eg module evaluations. Currently, I am obtaining Ethics Committee approvals, designing a content analysis framework and an interview structure. I intend to begin gathering data from the first module in the second part of this year.

Significance of the Research

The literature to date eg Eastmond, 1994; Berge , 1994) indicates that much of the substantive research in the CMC field has focused on distance learning. However, more recently, accounts of the use of CMC for on campus students have started to appear, eg Rimmershaw (1999). My reading of the literature to date indicates that there is a paucity of in depth research on student approaches to learning and learning strategies, particularly in a mixed mode environment. There is a need for further research on student perspectives (Laurillard, 1993) and for qualitative research in this area (Windschitl, 1998). There is a need to examine student learning from an ecological perspective (Entwistle, 1997) ie students interacting with the wider environment and vice versa.

This research will:
- add to the current body of research in the field of
  - asynchronous learning
  - approaches to learning and learning strategies
  - flexible or mixed mode learning
- provide new insights for teachers and those responsible for curriculum and programme development
- inform my own practice and potentially, practice within my workplace.

References