

Blogs versus discussion forums in postgraduate online continuing medical education.

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Introduction

The so-called “net generation”, those people who do not remember a time before the World Wide Web (e.g. Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005), are now beginning to enter tertiary institutions. In order to accommodate the perceived expectations of these students, there is strong institutional pressure to ensure that information and communication technology (ICT) is a standard component of tertiary teaching programs. Although some form of online delivery has become part of the mainstream teaching model, a major barrier to effective use of online tools is the need for academics to acquire the technical competence to author basic web content and use ICT (such as email, discussion forums, chat, instant messaging) within their comfort zone.

In this paper, I explore the reluctance of academics and institutions to embrace the use of blogs even when they understand the appropriateness of the tool to the communication model desired. I base my broader argument around data from the continuing medical education (CME) context in which I provide online learning support. As background to my thesis, I examine the rationale for embracing ICT in CME. I then propose that use of LMS to support online learning in fact is responsible for a subtle deskilling and disempowerment of academics in terms of ICT literacy which reinforces the inertia inherent in adopting new tools when existing ones can be made to serve the purpose, albeit in a clumsy or non-optimal manner. I argue, on the basis of data from 6 post-graduate CME courses, that much of the content of discussion forums would be better supported by blogging software than by forum software. Based on ideas derived from Downes (2004), Watson (2003), Williams and Jacobs (2004) and various online commentators, I put forward the proposition that in addition to the overhead of learning to use a new piece of software, reluctance to use blogging software is evidence of a deeper issue in terms of the task of writing itself. Despite the pivotal role of writing as the core communication mode of academic discourse, many participants in CME (both educators and students) have little intrinsic interest in the act of writing and are not driven to write beyond the need to fulfil course or specific professional requirements.

Rationale for use of ICT in CME

The Online Learning Unit (OLU) was set up in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences (FMDHS) at the University of Melbourne in order to assist with the development of post-graduate online courses in CME. The aim was to service new markets through use of ICT to reach health professionals who practice in remote locations or for whom time or ability to travel to campus-based courses is limited. The impetus for using ICT within the framework of CME is to promote the formation of “communities of practice” and social networks of practitioners that will endure beyond the formal course of study thereby supporting creation of learning networks for formal and informal ongoing professional practice. The OLU provides hosting of course material via web-based LMS, but has also actively explored use of blogging software such as Wordpress (www.wordpress.org), or locally hosted Blogger sites (www.blogger.com) and wikis such as PhpWiki (www.phpwiki.com) or the wiki tool within Moodle (www.moodle.org) to support communication and collaboration. Blogging software in particular appears to provide an

appropriate framework for the type of knowledge-sharing and interaction desired within CME programs and would allow the development of transferable skills and hosting options to facilitate continued participation in a community of practice beyond the duration of the formal study program.

Use of LMS to support online learning

A widely accepted “solution” to the problem of lack of technical skill of academics in terms of authoring online teaching materials has been to provide easy-to-use tools for building online courses that do not require any technical competence on the part of the user. LMS provide a range of communication and collaboration tools such as discussion forums, messaging, chat and whiteboards to allow online classroom-style interaction to supplement tools for building online learning materials and for online assessment. LMS also take care of the administrative side of teaching such as restricting access to course materials based on user roles, enrolling students in appropriate subjects and courses, releasing materials based on specific criteria, and providing areas for shared content or group projects.

Despite the range of interactive tools available within an LMS and the pedagogical possibilities afforded by each of these tools, by far the most common form of online interaction is via discussion forums, which can themselves support a range of different pedagogies. Discussion forums, which function a bit like group email spaces, seem to fit a metaphor of communication which is conceptually-accessible to non-technical academics, and once the discussion forum interface is mastered, can be used in a range of situation irrespective of whether a better tool is available.

The problem with LMS is that although they use the web (http) as a potentially global delivery medium, they do not use the web (communication space) in the way it was originally conceptualised (sharing of information irrespective of time, location and socio-political boundaries e.g. Tim Berners-Lee, 2000). LMS generally require authentication (restricted access to materials), content is organised into a course / subject hierarchy, and students are generally only able to access courses in which they are enrolled. The communication space is in fact more tightly controlled via an LMS than it is in campus-based courses because students can usually only interact with other students in the same cohort – the analogy for an on-campus course would be if you were not allowed to talk to anyone who was not in your class!

Furthermore, despite the so-called ease of use of most vendor-based LMS, there seems to be a general acceptance that academics using an LMS for teaching require at least a day of training, with extra training required for use of more advanced tools. This training is based around using vendor-specific tools to load content into the LMS so that it can be delivered in the teaching metaphor prescribed by the LMS. Although no web-specific skills are required (one can “author web content” without knowing HTML), instead one acquires non-transferable skills with a vendor-based web-application. It can end up being more difficult to build online content with web-specific skills than without because the user interface metaphors used by vendor-based LMS are idiosyncratically tool-based rather than generically web-based.

The use of LMS to deliver templated subjects with consistent navigation results in a common course format of course announcements, lecture notes (for resources) and discussion forums (for student interaction). The use of discussion forums allows communication between student and teacher as well as between students in a format readily understood by anyone who has previously used email. After training on one interface, most users can readily adapt to any other discussion forum implementation and understand the generic functions of

posting, replying, quoting, and displaying threads. Having mastered the metaphor, many pedagogies can be implemented, albeit sometimes rather clumsily, via forums – e.g. general or moderated discussion, posting of individual opinion pieces for the teacher to grade but for other students to see, debates, role plays, synchronous discussion, collaborative writing. Some forum tools have explicit settings to facilitate certain pedagogies and conversely some have settings that can be structured in a way that serves a purpose that was not part of the original design.

Case studies

Method

A major impetus for having an online component in post-graduate continuing medical education (CME) courses supported by the Online Learning Unit (OLU) is the ability to facilitate communication by use of discussion forums. Most discussion forums are based around specific questions posed by academic staff with the aim of eliciting exchange of ideas or “conversations” between students based on the subject matter they are studying. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules on appropriate use of forum software, I am adopting a position that discussion forums are primarily designed to support conversational threads – succinct topic-based exchanges to explore and share ideas – rather than to support collation of a series of monologues. I adopt the view that when the primary purpose is to collate a series of thoughtful opinion pieces with the option for comment on each of them, blogging software rather than forum software would be the infrastructure of choice.

In this paper, I look at the content of discussion posts in 6 post-graduate courses and consider whether discussion forums are the most appropriate model for the style of writing demonstrated.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of posts to discussion forums in 6 post-graduate courses (see Table 1) revealed that in 4 of the 6 courses, there was very little discussion per se, even though 3 of the 4 had a reasonable level of student participation.

Table 1: Number of posts to topic-based discussion forums in 6 courses

Course	Discipline area (Number of students)	Number of posts	Facilitator posts	Student posts	Post was related to subject material	Student discussion (continuation of thread)
1	Nursing (6)	94	34	60	75	3
2	Nursing (7)	144	62	82	132	11
3	Nursing (12)	632	61	571	428	193
4	General Practice (14)	107	49	58	102	68
5	General Practice (7)	121	5	116	116	18
6	General Practice (46)	241	211	30	241	3

In Courses 1 and 2 in Table 1 (two courses from the same degree program) only 14 / 207 posts continued a thread (ie were posted as replies to someone else's post). In fact most of these replies were to the facilitator rather than to other students. Despite a stated desire for the forums to encourage interaction between students around questions posed on subject material, the style of writing reinforced was that of a series of individual opinion pieces with facilitator feedback for all students to read. Initially (until explicitly discouraged by me in an online support role) most students posted their work as Word document attachments rather than in the body of the message, indicating a preference for using familiar writing tools, and level of preparation of the message that moves away from a conversation and towards a monologue. Although discussion forums can be used in this way and it is not "wrong" to do so, blogging software would provide more inbuilt support for this genre of writing and level of interaction. There is not much interest from the teaching staff in moving away from a currently understood framework (discussion forums) to a different technology (blogs) despite the new model supporting the pedagogy better. The perceived technological overhead is a significant barrier to adoption of blogging in these courses.

Two other courses, Courses 4 and 5, focussed specifically on communication skills in General Practice as their subject matter and were, not surprisingly, far more interactive. Course 4 was a model of conversation-style discussion around set topics and was actively facilitated as demonstrated by the even distribution of contributions between facilitators and students and the fact that around 60% of posts formed part of a thread. Although only 18 /

116 subject-related posts in Course 5 were classified as “discussion” (ie were within a thread), many other posts acknowledged content from other messages and promoted the concept of a conversation. Course 5 also had a very active social forum with a high level of student participation, and had another forum where permissions were manipulated so that the forum acted as a reflective journal shared between each individual participant and the facilitators, but not shared with other students. The reflective journal would have been more easily implemented with blogging software than via a forum tool, which is really a poor fit to the writing model. However the facilitators were comfortable using the discussion forums and did not want to try anything new because they did not feel confident of “experimenting with technology”.

Course 3 was a subject with a very high rate of interaction on the forums, but most of the discussion related to problems finding and printing materials rather than to the set topics. There was very little interaction on these topics, and many posts were monologues that were posted with a view to being graded by the facilitator rather than to elicit conversation with other students. A number of tasks within this subject would be better supported with blogging software, and the facilitator will consider moving in this direction in future semesters. Her major concern with blogs is that neither she nor her students will have the technical skill to use them and she does not want to be too ambitious technologically.

Course 6 comprised monthly online forums that were a non-compulsory aspect of a registrar training program. More than 85% of posts to these forums came from the facilitator providing links to web resources or announcements. Only 3 of the 30 student posts were replies to another message and only 13 / 46 students participated in the forums at all, although the majority of students logged in at least once. Blogging software would appear to provide better support for this type of content (annotated links to resources) and would allow the possibility for students to comment on materials or add their own annotated links in a way that could build an ongoing resource rather than a transitory conversation in which very few people participated. The way forward for this program depends on whether the facilitators want to better support the way the forums are currently used (in which case blogging software would be a good match), or they want encourage the forums to be used differently (by actively encouraging discussion and interaction).

Conclusions

This paper examined the use of discussion forums in a sample of post-graduate online medical education programs. In a number of instances, the genre of writing displayed was not a good fit to a discussion forum tool, and would be better supported by blogging software. The marked resistance to use of blogging software derives primarily from the perceived overhead of using a new tool (no matter how appropriate) when an existing tool (no matter how inappropriate) will do the job.

The genre of writing encouraged in 3 of the 6 courses was more like individual opinion pieces shared with the class than a conversation between participants, and as such appeared to be more suited to a blog format than a forum. Use of “comments”, “trackbacks” and class blogs and aggregators could then be used to support content organization, linking, interaction and a sense of community within each course, which could also be carried beyond the course.

In another two courses, blogging software could be used to support reflective journals (both private and open to other course participants) in conjunction with discussion forums for student interaction. The private blog would serve as a personal reflective journal, and the open blog of selected personal insights and edited reflections would allow the development of a “personal voice” (a participant identity) within the course which would then inform the

discussion of ideas. Discussion forums could be used to host more dynamic conversational interactions.

In the remaining course, the facilitator could use a blog to generate a list of annotated resources which could be built upon by successive cohorts.

Although the idea of using blogs in preference to discussion forums has been discussed with online educators, the concept of blogging is still a long way beyond their comfort zone. The barriers to adoption are a lack of familiarity with the genre, a lack of understanding of the potential of content aggregation and RSS feeds, and a lack of institutional infrastructure support for blogging, implicitly taking it outside the mainstream of supported online learning technology. There is a strong perception that mastering discussion forums defines the boundary of technical skill required by non-technical academics in online teaching. Until blogging tools become available within a centrally-supported LMS framework, there is likely to be strong resistance to use of blogs in mainstream tertiary teaching and learning.

A second barrier to uptake of blogging software is also emerging. Despite the implicit assumption that academics engage in writing as an important aspect of their discipline, it is not clear that participants in CME are “academic” in that sense, or have any in-built passion for writing per se, or for establishing ongoing written communication with other professionals. As evidenced by the lack of interaction among forum participants and anecdotal evidence from other courses, the majority of students only post because it is a course requirement, not because they feel any intrinsic motivation to contribute their ideas. In the one course where there was no requirement to participate, the participation rate was very low. Although social desirability and professional pressures lead to a general acceptance that collaboration with colleagues and sharing of ideas is “good”, most individuals are not strongly driven to write, nor are they inclined or internally motivated to share their insights regularly or rigorously. Perhaps we have successfully implemented a model of “self-directed learning” to the extent that communication with others and sharing of ideas is not really a high priority unless there are explicit rewards in doing so.

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