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Beginning to blog: methods for dialogue with students

Ollie Jones

Introduction

Dialogue and communication between staff and students is essential to teaching in higher education. Webb et al (2004) outline how dialogue is common in many models of learning, and highlights Mayes' (2001) view that dialogue is central to the whole learning cycle. Laurillard (2002) focuses on higher education and states that "the teaching-learning process is an iterative conversation", and that a significant part of a student's learning is an academic dialogue. This paper takes the position that Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have much to offer in providing additional opportunities for teacher-student dialogue, and in particular commends the use of tutor blogs to achieve this.

Context

The module used for this research project was Operations Management, a Level 2 module with approximately 200 students and part of a large Business Studies degree. The module is currently structured as a 1 hour lecture and 1.5 hour tutorial each week, over a 12-week semester. Therefore the opportunity to have constructive dialogue or conversations with students is limited, especially when attendance is taken into account.

Webb et al (2004) indicate that academic dialogue takes a number of forms which are outlined in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Conversation typology

Teacher - learner conversation	Learner - learner conversation	Learner - self conversation
One to one	One to one	Reflection
One to many	One to many	
	Many to many	

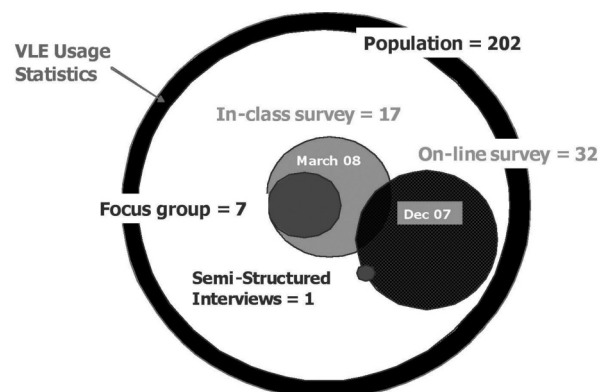
The module tutors were attempting to 'stretch' the teacher 'conversation' beyond the physical boundaries of the lecture and tutorial, both to increase the opportunity for students to have an academic dialogue and also to enable this to happen at times most suitable for the learner, both practically and pedagogically. This was seen as the first stage in increasing dialogue, and was therefore focused on the one-to-many type of dialogue.

Williams & Jacobs (2004) state that there is very little academic literature concerning blogs as educational tools, and these focus exclusively on student blogs or collaborative class blogs (Ferdig & Trammel, 2004). During the tutorial the often-critical moments of dialogue occur at the end of the activity, where the tutor and students are reviewing and reflecting on the results, outcomes and learning points from the class (Zimitat & Miffin, 2003). Therefore the blog was envisaged as a means to capture the tutor's reflection on the tutorial for the students to access at a later date, and to stimulate some reflection on their part to embed the learning experience. The blog content was also carefully designed to ensure that students still had to attend the tutorial in order to benefit from the blog. Each tutor would take 3-5 classes and write their blog at the end of each week. This provided some efficiency as it was not one blog entry per tutorial class, and allowed time to draw comparisons between groups and to reflect on the tutorial outcomes. Because there were three tutors it also provided students with a number of different perspectives on the same topic.

Methodology

The use and effectiveness of the blogs was evaluated using a range of methods and Figure 2 attempts to illustrate these in the context of the module cohort or population. The focus groups were drawn from the in-class survey, and it was not possible to determine whether some students had completed both the in-class and online surveys.

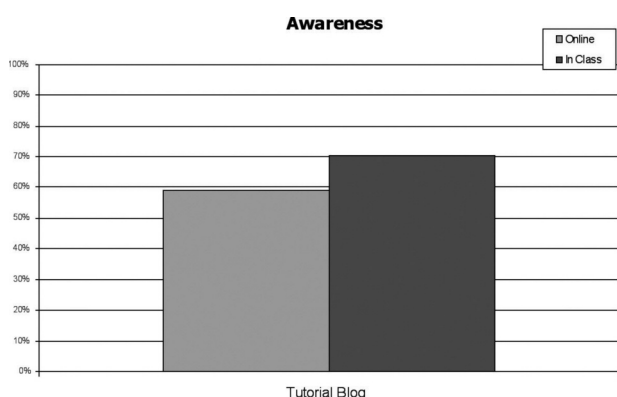
Figure 2: Methodology



Results and analysis

As Figure 3 indicates, between 30-40% of students, depending on the survey sample, were not aware of the availability of the blog, which raises questions about the site design and communication; this will be addressed as part of the annual module refreshment process this year.

Figure 3: Student awareness of the blog



Comments from the students correlate with the lower scores for awareness of this communication channel; as one student stated: "No one knew they existed..." The higher score for the class survey is perhaps due to the fact that it was taken later in the semester and after the assessment activity, when the blogs might have been used more. Those students who accessed the blog had mixed reactions when asked whether they had used it and whether it was useful:

"Not much. I might have had a brief look, but I didn't use them very much."

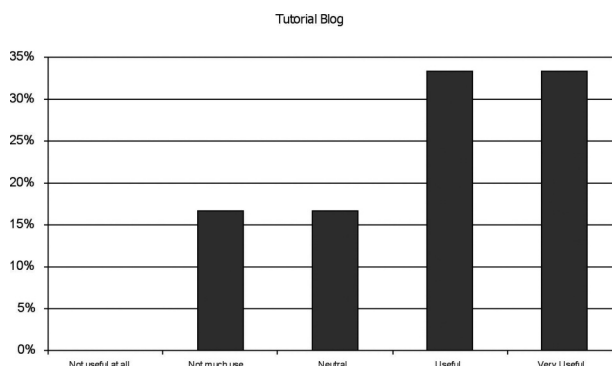
"Well I [had] been in every tutorial and I got what I was doing and I spoke to [the tutor] afterwards so I was all right and don't really feel I needed it, but I suppose if you weren't there you could [use it]."

"It was good... I do think I used them once to look back on to remind myself what we had done on the weeks and pick what I was going to write about."

"I looked at the blogs, yes. I found those really useful."

The quantitative data in Figure 4 seem to fit with the qualitative data above from the in-class survey group, although they do show a more positive tendency overall.

Figure 4: Student evaluation of usefulness of the blog

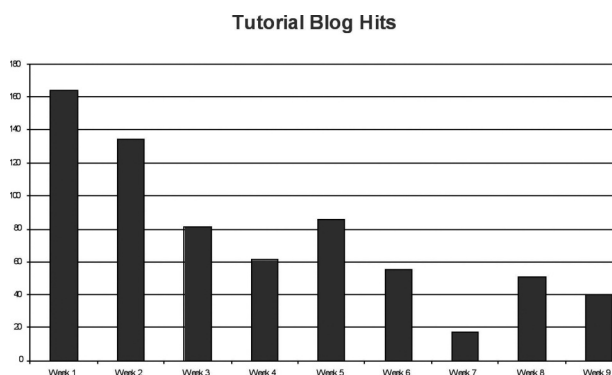


The students did, however, appear to use the blogs as they were intended, as continuation of the dialogue between teacher and learner:

"If I couldn't remember what I did in the tutorial, ... I looked back at those key points and then I remembered them, and they make it a bit ... clearer."

The blogs even prompted some students to read up an article that had been signposted in one of the weekly posts. However, the figures for the hits on the tutorial blogs week by week showed that the initial enthusiasm tailed off by the middle of the semester (Figure 5). This could correlate to some extent with a drop-off in attendance at tutorials, as the blog was less useful to students who did not attend. However, tutorial attendance did not fall off to the same extent as the blog activity.

Figure 5: Tutorial blog hits during the semester



There was a very strong indication that students read and valued the different perspectives from individual tutors in the blogs:

"Looked at things [my tutor] has said, then someone else had a different take on it, makes it a bit easier."

"Or if there was an issue that cropped up and [another tutor raised it], I found that useful."

"You might not understand how [my tutor] said it all. Look at another one, oh that's what that means..."

"I think on one of the weeks there was something brought up on a blog from another tutor, I don't think it was mentioned in our tutorial. That helped me."

Often in large modules with team teaching it is difficult to mobilise the value of the teaching team as greater than the sum of its parts, as tutors often take their own tutorial class in isolation even though they are covering the same material. It appears from the data from students who valued the alternative perspectives from different tutors that post-tutorial blogs could be a useful mechanism for providing some additional value from having a teaching team.

In addition because tutors were writing blogs for students which were reflective in nature, they were also provided with a facility to contribute to a private teaching tutorial blog, reflecting on the efficacy of the module design. These private blogs provided a vehicle for improvements in assessment, learning and teaching, and developing and supporting reflective practitioners.

Discussion and conclusions

The tutorial blog was reasonably successful and fulfilled its design purpose from the tutors' perspective, and offered a valuable learning tool for the majority of students and staff who engaged with it. It appeared to be especially valuable in providing differing perspectives to the students, although work needs to be done to understand and rectify the dwindling engagement during the latter half of the semester.

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