Managing Student Expectations Online

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Abstract. In contrast to other studies of students in online environments, which examine the skills and attitudes that students bring to an online university learning environment, we are interested in the expectations with which students come to online university study. Four expectational barriers, which arise from students' background and cultural history, are identified as being: who is responsible for learning, who is responsible for student interaction with content, who is responsible for the use of appropriate learning strategies and who is responsible for required ancillary skills. There is a discussion of how these barriers arise and how one might attempt to manage the students' expectations and ameliorate their effects.

1 Introduction

The American Psychological Association has identified a number of factors which are associated with success in a course of study (APA, 1997). The students' motivational and emotional state regarding the study on which they are embarking, their intrinsic motivation to learn, their curiosity, insightfulness and their perception that the learning tasks are designed to be interesting and to engage them in personally useful, real-world situations are all important contributors to outcomes. Students also bring their differing familial and societal backgrounds with them and these will affect their interpersonal interactions in group tasks, their opportunities for seeing different perspectives, their feelings of self-respect and perceived sexual stereotypes. Through these various influences the student has to deal with learner-content, learner-learner and learner-instructor issues (Chou, 2004) as well as learner-interface difficulties (Hillman et al., 1994). They also have a set of expectations based on their educational experiences to date. The disparity between their expectations and the actuality of online learning in a university environment will greatly affect how they deal with these difficulties and, ultimately, affect educational outcomes.

This paper explores some of these potential disparities and identifies how the difficulties, which arise, have been or might be addressed in the context of a fully online presentation of a computer ethics course in our university

2 The Changing Setting of the Educational Experience

The student body enrolled in the course being discussed come from a wide range of previous educational experiences. Local students include those who have completed

R.W.H. Lau et al. (Eds.): ICWL 2005, LNCS 3583, pp. 355 – 363, 2005.

high school, others who have completed a post-secondary diploma and have transferred into university, and yet others who are mature age students who have entered on the basis of some experience other than formal education. Overseas students all have completed high school in their home country. Some commence their tertiary studies directly after completing high school, some have completed a suitable post-secondary diploma course in their home country, and some have completed the first, and possibly second, year of our degree in an overseas partner institution.

Courses at our university are presented in a mixture of modes (Coldwell and Newlands, 2004). On-campus students will encounter traditional, face-to-face teaching, but it is supported by online technologies. Typical, individual, off-campus students enrolled in this course have all materials delivered by online technologies supplemented by online contact and discussion forums. Overseas partner institutions have materials supplied by online technologies but students are supported by local tutors. The university endeavours to provide as similar a learning experience as possible to all students, regardless of mode of study or physical location. This is supported by our current learning management system (LMS), which is implemented using WebCT Vista. As part of the University's commitment to preparing students for lifelong learning, it has prescribed that every student must experience at least one wholly online course as part of their undergraduate degree programme (Deakin University, 2003). The computer ethics unit being discussed here is one such course.

The computer ethics course is a final year core unit for all students enrolled in the Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT). It is unusual for this unit to be given as advance standing, so essentially every student has to complete it. This has resulted in very large class size (500+ students in 2004). Students have different levels of local learning experiences when they encounter this course. On the one hand, there is the traditional student who is in their last semester of study having completed 5 or more full-time equivalent semesters at Deakin already. At the other extreme, there is the student who is just commencing their studies at Deakin with 2 years equivalent of advance standing and encountering the computer ethics unit as one of their first courses in this new environment.

As the computer ethics course is compulsory in the BIT, the students are thrust into university studies in an online mode without any options. They *must* access materials online, submit assignments online, collaborate with group members online and take an active part in online discussions. They have very different levels of experience of using the online environment from never having encountered any online learning environments through to those who may have already encountered a wholly online unit in their studies. The subsequent sections of this paper explore the expectations of students and the faculty in this environment.

3 What Expectations?

3.1 Faculty Expectations

Faculty expectations of students are varied and some are reflected in the Student Responsibilities section of our University's Student Charter (Deakin University, 2004), viz.:

1. students are expected to be self-motivated and self-directed learners;
2. students are expected to prepare for and to participate appropriately in the range of experiences which make up their course of study;
3. students are responsible for ancillary skills such as use of technology (although that might be implied in above);
4. students are expected to ensure regular electronic contact with the university via StudentConnect, (providing students access to enrolment, administrative and support services).

These may be reasonable expectations but they offer little guidance on how to satisfy them. There is an implicit expectation that strategies to satisfy them are known to all students but this expectation takes no cognisance of the wide variety of social, cultural and educational backgrounds from which the students come. It is, then, unsurprising that some, perhaps many, students are not ready for online university study.

3.2 Student Expectations

Surveys of student expectations (for example Bolliger and Martindale, 2004) reveal that students expect:

1. staff to be available at flexible times;
2. good response times for queries and marking;
3. easily accessible help with technology;
4. easy to navigate web sites;
5. course content to be perceived to be real-world and relevant to their future;
6. facilitation of collaboration in tasks.

The first three items are concerned with expectations of the staff which appear to be reasonable. However, the first item, in particular, is often assessed poorly in student surveys as the students do not realise that faculty are expected to devote time to research as well as teaching, have a life away from the university, and cannot be available 24/7 as some students expect. The fifth item appears to be entirely reasonable but student perceptions of what is meaningful and real-world does not necessarily correspond with that of faculty. This is, perhaps, particularly true in the early stages of a programme of study when the students are unfamiliar with the subject matter and the distinctions drawn

4 The Disparity in Expectations

The high school learning environment is different from a university learning environment for a number of reasons, some of which are:

1. high school teaching takes place in small groups (25-30 in a class, 15-20 in a lab) compared to lectures with groups of 50 to several hundred and compared to online where it may appear to be a group of one;
2. interactivity may be entirely driven by the instructor in high school but in an online university setting, it is expected to be largely student driven, particularly in group-oriented activities;

3. the social interactivity and maturity of students at high school is variable and they may not be ready for interaction with an heterogeneous group of strangers, far less students from other cultures and countries;
4. students may have used computers in a variety of settings but purely as a tool to complete discrete tasks and not as the primary communication tool as is required in online learning environments.

The cultural baggage which students carry relates to their:

1. attitude to others, elders, those with higher perceived social standing, strangers;
2. likelihood of interacting with the above;
3. likelihood of initiating such interaction;
4. ability to use the language of instruction and the sophistication of such use.

Problems arising from the above can be examined under a number of separate headings).

4.1 Who Is Responsible for Learning?

Disparity of expectations appears to stem from the perception of who is responsible for what. High school is traditionally an *instructivist* environment (Burford and Haggis, 2000) where teachers are responsible for teaching the material and for the students' learning. At the tertiary level, the rate of presentation of content is much greater and the lecturer cannot present all of the relevant content but will be more concerned with the overall structure rather than dealing with detail in every area. Since the students are now responsible for at least some of their learning, the large scale structure of the syllabus content is an important concern for the academic and a *constructivist* approach, showing the structure of the syllabus content, is attractive. The academic is now responsible for ensuring that students are provided with the means to learn rather than instruction per se. The responsibility for learning rests squarely on the students' own shoulders. This forms the first barrier due to the differing expectations as to who is responsible for learning.

4.2 Who Is Responsible for the Student Interacting with the Syllabus Content?

Our experience of students learning behaviour at the level of this course suggests that they are assessment driven and this colours the manner in which they deal with requirements. They also seem hesitant to take on the responsibility for their learning and would rather that it be shouldered by academics. This disparity often causes major problems for both staff and students particularly in online courses as the online learning environment is a *pull* technology as opposed to the face-to-face classroom situation which is more congruent with *push* technology. What do we mean by this? In the classroom students may, if they wish, simply absorb what is being said to them by the teacher. They have little option but to listen to what is being said. However, in the online environment, the best that the teacher can achieve is to make available the information that they require the student to access. It is then up to the student to access and read that information. This forms a second barrier due to differing expectations as to who is responsible for student interacting with the syllabus content.

4.3 Who Is Responsible for Use of Appropriate Learning Strategies?

Students may not understand the difference between surface or superficial learning and deep learning approaches to study. They may not realise that rote learning often leads to superficial learning rather than deep learning (Richardson, 1994). Rote learning may be implicit in high school learning, perhaps driven by assessment methods. These may be such that subjects in which assessment modes emphasise recall, like history or English literature, encourage surface learning whereas subjects such as mathematics and physics encourage deep learning strategies. Asian high schools appear to teach from an authoritative position rather than encourage experiment, discussion and insight (Smith, S., Miller, R., and Crassini, B. 1998). The students' lack of understanding of the inappropriateness of some learning modes form a third barrier.

4.4 Who Is Responsible for Ancillary Skills in the Online Environment?

Student attitudes to computers, networks and online communications are often that detail of use should be explicitly taught rather than made available and expect students to self learn. Bearing in mind that the students we are discussing here are all BIT students and have reasonable levels of computer literacy, this is somewhat surprising! The students' lack of ancillary skills and their expectation as to who is responsible for these skills is a fourth barrier to student learning since it interferes with their ability to easily access syllabus content, particularly as online learning environments are inherently constructivist and collaborative in nature.

5 Strategies to Manage the Disparities

5.1 Responsibility for Learning

Although the online learning context is student-centered, it is not entirely so. The lecturer *does* interact with the students via messaging and discussion forums as well as via the online syllabus content. However, the student expectation, arising from their past experiences, may lead them to believe that only face-to-face contact is important and that all secondary, indirect contact is optional and ignorable. Other face-to-face strategies such as timely reminders and follow-up on items become less immediate in the online environment since we cannot force students to find or read these. This can be seen as a consequence of the contrast between the immediacy of an on-campus presentation compared with the hypermediacy, but lack of immediacy, of the web-based presentation (Richards, 2002).

One solution is to use an effective tracking mechanism embedded in the LMS. Tracking statistics can show various levels of detail of individual student activity including.

1. when have they logged into the system;
2. when have they accessed (but not necessarily read!) announcements, subject materials etc.;
3. when have they accessed assignments,
4. when have they attempted to submit their solutions.

Use of this tracking information allows one to react to students who are not engaging with the material on an individual and person-to-person basis. For instance, enrolled students who have failed to submit the first assignment can be identified and contacted through channels other than the LMS in a time-frame permitting remediation of their behaviour. This can, to some extent, replace the immediacy of face-to-face contact so that the instructor can identify non-engaging behaviour and try to remedy it. It may even be an easier problem to handle the online student who does not read than the on-campus student who doesn't turn up.

5.2 Interacting with Syllabus Content

In the classroom situation academics are able to use various means to encourage students to engage with syllabus content, such as verbal discussions, providing readings, asking questions and so on. What is different about online learning environments? It is still possible to encourage engagement through discussion forums, content delivery and posing questions. The problem here is the intervening technology interface. Although the technology infrastructure layer of an LMS should play an invisible supporting role, as suggested by Harris (1999), it inevitably intervenes in the interactions between LMS users, be they staff or students. Rather than communication being direct, it is being facilitated by a software artifact, introducing the issues related to human-computer interactions rather than human-human interactions. It is no longer possible to view students' reactions for example, identify whether their attention has lapsed or they have become distracted.

However, there are additional tools and functionality in an electronic environment that are not necessarily available in the face-to-face situation. It is possible to send regular reminders regarding upcoming deadlines, work requirements and other key events. This can be done in various ways such as:

1. global announcements to the class which, in WebCT Vista, take the form of pop-up windows that appear when students access their online classroom;
2. messages on discussion boards providing information and advice. Unlike verbally provided advice, the message is permanently on the board for students to view and review;
3. individual or global emails sent to the students' preferred email address.

There is opportunity, however, for these forums to be overused and the resultant dissemination of information being viewed by students as spam. A survey of students enrolled in the computer ethics course in 2003 indicated that providing information using these various forums was deemed useful by those who were well-motivated, and simply a nuisance factor by those who were not! In 2004, staff minimised the number of different forums that were used regularly to disseminate the same information. However, a different problem arose as some students did not bother to read the information and messages, rather taking the easy route and simply posing a question to elicit the required response. This had the effect of increasing the number of messages on discussion boards unnecessarily as many students who *had* read the information proceeded to reply suggesting, politely and sometimes not so politely, that the questioner should “read the previous messages/appropriate document/announcement”.

5.3 Appropriate Learning Strategies

Salmon's studies (Salmon, 2002; Salmon, 2003) suggest that online communities need to develop to enhance communication and hence learning. But where do students learn interactive discussion habits, even face-to-face, if not online, ones other than by absorption? Many students appear comfortable with using electronic means of communication. For example they can be found SMSing during lectures, or communicating in a variety of chat rooms during laboratory sessions. However, place academic overtones on the online discussion and they appear to become much less communicative. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students are concerned, in such an environment, with being right or wrong. This could stem from their assessment driven learning style. They perceive themselves as being judged, perhaps more so than they actually are. This is evidenced by students' concerns with how many marks they achieved each week for their online contributions.

Online facilitation and moderation are skills staff need to acquire. Staff need to be quick to respond to online enquiries to avoid mole hills escalating quickly into mountains. One strategy to overcome the escalation problem is to publish guidelines as to what level of service students can expect. As mentioned previously, students can be quite unreasonable when it comes to 24/7 service particularly at times of increased stress such as around assignment due dates. As in the case of cancelled face-to-face classes, students need to be informed if staff are unavailable at times they expect.

Assessment tasks need to be explicit and be directed at a specific goal or outcome so that student expectations can be set appropriately. Active participation needs to be perceived by students as valuable. To many this translates to contributing to their overall mark. The perceived value bears a strong relationship to the relative value of the task to the overall assessment. Contrariwise, one should not over specify the introductory tasks. We have seen an example where students were directed to a) post a message, b) respond to at least one other message, and c) respond to one message that was posted in response to yours! Do we have to teach students how to hold a conversation?

5.4 Ancillary Skills

Research agrees that orientation tasks are an essential component allowing students to familiarise themselves with the environment, become familiar with course requirements and to develop a relationship with other participants (Salmon, 2003; Smith et al., 2004). Salmon suggests however that the orientation and support needs to occur only in the early stages of the online activity, with students being able to take on more of the responsibility for learning as they progress. Smith et al. (2004), however, recommends that orientation and support activities may need to continue throughout the students' tenure in the online environment. The main difference here is that Salmon's students appear to be more mature and self-motivated, and have chosen the course as it is online thus better meeting their learning requirements. The students that Smith et al. are discussing did not chose to study online, come from very different backgrounds, as discussed earlier, and are not self-motivated or mature.

These orientation tasks should exercise the ancillary skills required *by design* and the students should understand that this is how they become familiar with new tech-

nologies and new learning skills. Our experience suggests that even those students who have passed a class specifically using such technologies appreciate a revision. Faculty, of course, worry about student compartmentalising of knowledge as belonging to this or that unit but this seems to be a trait in all but the best students

6 Conclusions

This paper has looked at the management of student expectations rather than at the technology used or at the course content or methods of teaching. It is asserted that one has to be aware of the students' expectations as they approach online, university study and where these expectations arose. To present a course which will be engaging for the students, one has to ensure that they have realistic expectations. We have identified four areas where students may have inappropriate expectations: who is responsible for their learning, who is responsible for how they interact with the syllabus, who is responsible for their using appropriate learning strategies and who is responsible for their having appropriate ancillary skills to learn in the online environment. Methods to manage expectations and methods of monitoring the effect of the management have been discussed in the light of our experience using an LMS to deliver a computer ethics course. Efforts should also be made to ensure expectations are continuously cultivated to allow students to achieve a positive outcome when experiencing online learning.

A recent development that may overcome some of the current limitations of electronic online learning systems, which appear to be aggravating the barriers to engagement, is the new generation of synchronous communication tools which allow more than just online chat and whiteboard facilities. Modern technologies provide functionality for online chat and whiteboard as well as video, application sharing, desktop control and voice. Voice and video functions in particular, would overcome the inability to *see*, and the desktop control and application sharing could usefully assist in technical support, but these are reliant on the technology being present at both ends of the communication channel. Although we have relied on asynchronous communication in the computer ethics unit to date, the new generation of synchronous tools may go some way to minimising some of the barriers described here.

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