DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES OF THE ROLE OF THE LECTURER IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS

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Summary

Online discussions have the potential to provide a rich teaching and learning environment in an interactive, flexible and effective way. As Hootstein contends (2002), the effectiveness and success of online learning and teaching is dependent on the role facilitators play in these online discussions. The purpose of this research was to use a case study to investigate the role facilitators fulfil and to determine students' perceptions of the role of lecturers as facilitators in online discussions, in order to guide lecturers in utilising and managing online discussions optimally. Data were collected from the following two sources: (1) online postings from students and lecturers, and (2) questionnaires completed by students. The findings indicated that lecturers did in fact play a specific role in the online discussions. Also, from the questionnaires it is clear that students have definite perceptions of what the role of the lecturer as facilitator should be. These perceptions should remind us that adult distance education is not a free-floating form of self-instruction, but that it operates within certain boundaries that should be carefully managed by other human beings (Hult et al 2005). This paper presents the findings of the research and discusses the issues involved in the study.

Introduction

Online discussions have the potential to provide a rich teaching and learning environment in an interactive, flexible and effective way. Hootstein (2002) appropriately mentions that the effectiveness and success of online learning and teaching is dependent on the facilitators' roles. The purpose of this paper is to report on research conducted on the role of lecturers, and in particular on students' perceptions of the role of the lecturer as a facilitator in these online discussions. The research involved a group of postgraduate students from the University of South Africa (Unisa), a mega university for open and distance learning. The findings of the study could guide lecturers in optimally utilising and managing online discussions as a teaching and learning tool.

Main body

The role of the lecturer in online discussions

Interpersonal interaction in distance education in the past mainly occurred between lecturer and student but is increasingly changing to students interacting with one another with the

lecturer assuming the role of a facilitator. This is in line with the basic tenets of social constructivism, which is the theoretical framework of this research. The significance of the students' interaction with their social environment is relevant in this study: the students are at the centre of the learning environment, while the lecturers are deemed to be guides or facilitators.

Over time, several researchers have described the role of the facilitator in online discussions. Rohfeld and Hiemstra (1995:91), for instance, emphasise the importance of modelling effective teaching, keeping discussions on track, presenting special knowledge and insights, weaving together discussion threads and maintaining group harmony. The role of the lecturer as a facilitator is further commonly categorised in four groups, namely academic, social, managerial and technical areas (Berge 1995:22, Wang 2008:859).

Although a large body of literature has reported on the role the lecturer could play in online discussions (Berge 1995 & 2006; Hootstein 2002; Salmon 2004), little empirical research has been conducted on the actual role the lecturer plays and on students' perspectives of the lecturer's role. Hence the purpose of this research is to make a contribution in this regard.

The aim of this study was to use a case study to answer the following research questions:

- What is the role of the lecturer in online discussions?
- What do students expect from lecturers in online discussions?
- How can we, as lecturers, manage these discussions to be "invisibly present" (Vygotsky 1987) and at the same time, promote critical thinking and knowledge construction?

Background and contextualisation

In order to contextualise the study, it should be mentioned that Unisa only started utilising the information system formally as a teaching and learning tool in 2006. This means that it is still fairly new to most Unisa students, and despite of numerous attempts to help students use it, many still feel technologically "impaired" and tend to avoid using it. Moreover, only about 50% of Unisa students have access to the internet while many only have access through their employers or at internet cafés. Traditionally, all communication is via tutorial letters and at this stage, all students still receive hard copies of their study material and tutorial letters. Although this procedure is deemed necessary, it could contribute to students' negligence in visiting Unisa's website.

Research design

Data were collected during the 2008 academic year (January 2008 to January 2009) with a group of postgraduate students in education. The case in this case study can therefore be defined as a cohort of Unisa honours students enrolled for a core module in the programme – focusing on teaching and learning theory and practice. Although there were just over 2 700 students registered for this module, only 563 had registered online. In this particular module, because the forum for online discussions was used for the first time as a teaching and learning tool, it was found to be particularly useful to provide meaningful data. By reflecting on what was happening in the discussions in 2008, we, as lecturers can gain a better understanding on how to manage these forums.

Data were collected from two sources: (1) the online postings of students and lecturers in 2008, and (2) questionnaires completed by the students involved in the online discussions. The purpose of the research falls into two sections. First, the role of lecturers was identified

by a qualitative investigation on the posting data. Second, by analysing the questionnaires, students' perceptions of the lecturer's role in online discussions were investigated.

Discussion of the findings

(1) *The role of the lecturers in the online discussions*

At the beginning of the academic year, the lecturers posted a welcome message on the forum and students were encouraged to join in the online discussions. The lecturers communicated to students that they would visit the online discussions at least twice a week. Initially, students were not that active in the discussions and limited themselves to asking questions about difficult concepts they were unsure of, the first assignment and prescribed books, but they did not respond to one another or initiate conversations on the topics. The lecturers therefore had to intervene by addressing important issues. The first four months revealed only six student postings and four lecturer postings. On the strength of the number and content of lecturer postings, one could conclude that the lecturer postings steered the online discussions during this period. According to Hootstein (2002), facilitators are responsible for beginning a course by posting the necessary introductions and encouraging student interaction.

In May, the dialogue rapidly picked up, probably because the first of the students' four assignments had to be submitted by the end of that month. A lively discussion was initiated between students. The students appeared to realise that their peers were also holders of knowledge and they started responding to one another's postings (Markel 2001). The two main topics related to the content and interpretation of the first assignment and coping with stress and the workload. One topic that stood out in the discussions was mutual support. One student wrote:

> It is really great to hear everyone's concerns. Makes me not feel completely isolated. Hope you all do well in your essays.

During May, the role of the lecturers was mainly to praise students for their efforts to discuss the main aspects of the assignments and therefore the course content, and to provide guidance in this regard. There were eight lecturer postings and 43 student postings. Based on the number and content of lecturer postings during May, it is clear that the role of lecturers had shifted radically from steering the online discussions to playing a supportive and guiding role.

The discussions in June, July and August dealt mainly with five topics:

- contact sessions, which are held once a year
- the prescribed books
- different assignment questions
- an academic discussion on the "Africanisation" of the curriculum, initiated by the lecturers
- the frustrations surrounding the demands of studying and working full time

The role of the lecturers during these three months was mainly to initiate and facilitate the academic discussions and play a supportive role, encouraging students to work hard and manage their time. The middle of the year, which is the busiest time of the academic year because of assignment submissions and contact sessions, is renowned for its high dropout rate. June, July and August reported 212 student postings and 12 lecturer postings.

From September to November, the number of postings decreased, mainly because the last assignment had to be submitted by the beginning of September. During this period, discussions mainly focused on establishing study groups for examination preparation and administration relating to the forthcoming examinations. During this period, the primary role of the lecturers was to provide information about examination administration. There were 38 student postings and five lecturer postings.

In December and January, the number of postings increased because of the January examinations. All the discussions revolved around examination preparation. The large volume of work that had to be studied and discussions about possible questions, were two of the main topics. There was also much dialogue about the problem of time management, studying the huge amount of work and coping in general. Students also encouraged one another on a large scale. Students approached lecturers directly with questions relating to the examinations. This is in contrast with previous discussions, where students put questions to the forum, not addressing anybody specifically. One student wrote:

> *Dear Prof I need info. The exam preparation is a lot of work! If for instance, I would like to contrast the modern and postmodern paradigms, where do I start? The information in the textbook is simply too much. Please assist!*

It is interesting to note that the online discussions even continued after the examinations. The paper and issues such as the length and fairness of the paper were discussed. During these two months, the role of the lecturers focused on providing academic information and guidance and playing a supportive role while the students were sometimes in a panic about their studies. During December and January, there were 74 student postings and 16 lecturer postings.

(2) *Students' perceptions of lecturers' presence and role*

A questionnaire with mainly open questions was posted on the module website and students were encouraged to complete it anonymously. At the end of January 2009, 56 questionnaires were submitted. The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine students' perceptions of the value of the online discussions, and more specifically, the role they thought the lecturer should play in these discussions.

The questionnaire consisted of ten questions, and for the purpose of this paper, the two questions with the most reference to the role of the lecturer will be discussed.

To the first question, asking if students were satisfied with the presence of the lecturers in the online discussions, 59 answered "yes", two felt that they were satisfied, but that the role was limited, and five answered "no", indicating that lecturers were not always available and did not answer students' questions. One student had the following to say:

> *"You see, it is not directed at any one in particular … these are fellow students and I would like the lecturers to intervene and answer questions."*

Both Hootstein (2002) and Markel (2001) emphasise the importance of lecturer feedback as being critical to the learning process, even more so in online courses. This helps to prevent students from feeling isolated and detached and ultimately from reducing participation in the discussions.

The second question asked students what they thought the role of the lecturer should be in the online discussions. The responses varied and can be placed in eight categories:

The students stated that lecturers should

- provide guidance in terms of subject or general matter
- answer students' questions
- assist with assignments
- initiate debates about difficult assignment questions
- introduce topical questions
- be actively involved
- clarify difficult concepts
- involve distance students more

These perceptions of students should remind us, as Hult, Dahlgren, Hamilton and Söderström (2005:1) put it, that adult (distance) education is not a free-floating form of self-instruction, but operates within certain boundaries that should carefully be managed by other human beings.

If one compares the roles the lecturers played in this case study with the students' expectations of the roles of the lecturer, there is a significant degree of overlapping, which can be summarised in the following table:

The role of the lecturers	Students' perceptions of lecturers' roles
- Explain difficult concepts - Assist with first assignment and prescribed books - Support and guide students - Encourage students to work hard - Assist with time management - Initiate and facilitate academic discussions - Assist with examination preparation	- Clarify difficult concepts - Assist with assignments - Provide guidance in terms of subject or general matter - Answer students' questions - Initiate debates about difficult assignment questions - Introduce topical questions - Be actively involved - Involve distance students more

The implications for the lecturer in this regard are to fulfil these roles as far as possible in order to optimally utilise this valuable tool for teaching and learning. It demands proper planning and communication to students, so that they know exactly what to expect from the online discussions. It also is a powerful tool that breaks the barriers of distance learning.

A statement by one student aptly describes the value of online discussions in distance education:

> "Full-time teaching and studying is really catching up on me!! I am very glad to see that I am not alone."

Another quote in the online discussions relates to the lecturer's role:

> "I appreciate your effort in ensuring that we get good education with less difficulty, especially for us who study at a distance."

Conclusion

From the online postings and the questionnaires it is clear that lecturers as facilitators have a definite role to play in online discussions. It also shows that students have specific perceptions of the role lecturers should fulfil in this regard.

Although the research is conducted in one module of a postgraduate programme, the value of the research lies in the fact that it explores students' perspectives on the lecturer's role in online discussions, in order to guide lecturers in utilising and managing online discussions optimally.

However, we all realise that every context, regardless of the technology used, has a different "feel" about online discussions, and what may work in one setting with one group of students, may not work for the next one. Both the lecturer and students are frequently challenged by new roles, functions and tasks they need to perform. It takes time for students and instructors to develop the effective use of technology-mediated instruction, and for students to learn in this environment. Besides this, technology is developing at an unprecedented rate. Hence frequent research in this field is not only exciting, but also absolutely imperative.

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