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A discussion on developing online learning communities for student information professionals

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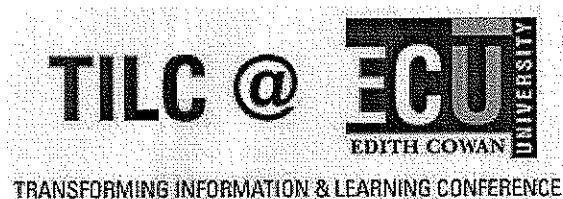
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Biography

Dr Karen Anderson teaches in programs for information services professionals at Edith Cowan University. She is Vice President of the International Council on Archives Section for Archival Educators (2004-2008, having been President of the Section in 2000-2004). She has presented papers at a number of international seminars on development, delivery and evaluation of distance education for archivists and records managers using online technologies. In 2003, Dr Anderson was a winner of the Edith Cowan University Vice-Chancellor's Excellence in Teaching Award.

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Abstract

The Internet provides a wealth of resources and opportunities for enhancing professional education. In professional education courses for archivists and records managers, students can shape their own learning and develop professional skills through authentic assessment strategies which require them to find, analyse and evaluate policy documents and best practice standards published by leading archival organizations. Use of online discussion facilities provided by the ECU School of Computer and Information Science's eCourse system allows students to engage in professional discussion just as they would in the workplace while developing communication and information literacy skills. Student evaluations of this form of assessment are encouragingly positive.

Introduction

One of the big challenges of online education for distance students is the need to overcome the feeling of isolation that many students experience. This isolation can be very debilitating. In a traditional distance education system where course materials are posted to students in print format, they study alone, never meet other students, don't know who else is studying the same subject and can't compare their performance with that of their fellow students. Some fall behind schedule in their work and some drop out altogether because they can't cope with the loneliness of the experience.

Most of my teaching is in professional programs for archivists and records managers. As in any profession, students need to acquire the body of knowledge and skills essential for prospective practitioners in the profession. They must learn to take part in professional debate and discussion, soundly basing their own work and opinions on discussion papers and best practice standards published by leading archival organizations while acquiring the life-long learning skills of communication and information literacy. They must also immerse themselves in their new professional world, finding examples of how things are done, how archival organizations present themselves, and the programs they offer to their various clienteles. Students are required to find, analyse and evaluate policy documents and standards, as well as engage in professional discussion just as they would in the workplace. All students in these programs study by distance education: there are no on-campus lectures or residential programs. So opportunities for many students to

make a group visit to a particular organization are very rare. It is certainly impossible to gather a whole class for a physical discussion or field trip.

The Internet can be used to help overcome these problems of isolation, putting students in regular contact with fellow students and tutors. It can also expose them to best practice through archival organisations' websites and the services, standards and advice offered there. My quest in the ten years since these programs began in 1994 has been to find ways to increase student interaction with each other in practical and manageable ways. I always reflect on how this might be done a little better each year and try to learn from successes and failures.

Using electronic discussions to promote learning

I have successfully used electronic Forums, which operate like listserves, as part of the assessment for a number of study units, or subjects. The first time I tried this was in an introductory unit called *Documenting Society* to promote discussion on ethical issues. Students are given three hypothetical case studies as problems created by Ann Pederson. They are referred to Codes of Ethics published by the International Council on Archives, the Australian Society of Archivists and The Association of Canadian Archivists as well as other professional bodies to use as resources to guide their approach to the problems. Lively discussions ensue! Some of the most encouraging evaluative comments on the assessment follow. The comments are presented completely unedited to let the students speak in their own words.

Student A

I found this part of the course one of the most interesting and most stimulating ways of assessment I have ever seen!! Thanks.

Student B

I have studied quite a number of years externally and this is the first time I have actually felt interested and not forced to sit down and do the work. You have made a unit that seemed quite formidable a huge amount of fun. Congratulations!!!

Student C

I thought the discussion was excellent. You try to cover all bases in your assignment answers and it was great to actually see how your efforts compared to other students. This is something lacking in normal external assignments versus on-campus studies. You know what marks you end up getting but you never have any knowledge about how other students responded.

This last is a particularly important issue for distance education students. Unlike students studying on campus, they do not have the opportunity to meet and compare notes or tutors' feedback on assignments. Even when tutors are diligent about providing feedback to the whole class when an assignment has been completed, individuals only catch a glimpse of the probable standard and content of work submitted by others in their group. Being able to see other students' work of this nature helps to set benchmarks to which all students can aspire. The quality of contributions to discussions tends to rise towards meeting those of the better students.

However, it doesn't always work well! This style of assessment was not as successful at first when tried with more technical topics. The subject matter of a unit on *Electronic Recordkeeping* is not nearly as engaging for discussion as the ethical problems set in *Documenting Society*. The *Electronic Recordkeeping* unit approaches the problem of ensuring the capture and long-term preservation of electronic records through systems analysis and design and through implementation of policy and standards for electronic documents, and systems. It is essential to the management of records and archives in the current and future technological environment, but reading the strategies and standards of national and state archival institutions is not as much fun as debating the rights and wrongs of other people's approaches to ethical dilemmas, nor are opinions as strongly held.

There is also reluctance on the part of students to actively criticise anything put forward as a 'standard'. There seems to be a sense that as novices, they are in no position to criticise such formal documents. They need to gain confidence first, in their own understanding and critical evaluation skills and in their ability to participate in discussions through a supportive learning community. In *Electronic Recordkeeping*, although students in classes up to 2002 fulfilled the requirements to post the results of their own reading concerning three set problems, they were much less likely to comment on others' work. If they did, conversations between several students rarely ensued. Comments posted to the Forums were rarely endorsed or challenged by others.

I had also noticed that in one problem where students were encouraged to search freely and widely for resources to back up their opinions in a discussion about three possible approaches to preservation of electronic records the discussion Forum was much more active and less stilted than when discussing a particular standard. Briefly the approaches suggested for discussion were migration, emulation and keeping a museum of hardware and software as a means to access records embedded in superseded hardware and software systems. There were two components to responses to this problem that distinguished it from the two later problems that were based on the importance and shortcomings of particular industry standards. Although students were given suggestions on basic reading to start them thinking, they were much more likely in this problem to branch out and search for themselves for more resources, whereas when discussing a prescribed standard, their reading tended to be more limited. Students were more comfortable taking a stand and defending their preferred solution, but were also willing to change their view if the arguments put forward by others were sufficiently persuasive. There was much more conversational exchange.

The features that distinguished this problem from the two subsequent problems were opportunities to:

1. make a choice and defend it; and
2. search for resources or examples that would back up that choice. This process broadens thinking and throws new light on issues through the experience of others.

Accordingly, I changed the remaining two discussion problems in the assignment with the aim of encouraging students to more actively share their learning. In one problem, students are now asked to summarise and share a resource, an article or a website that had particularly helped them to gain an understanding of issues concerning metadata standards, a concept that many find difficult when first encountered. In another problem, students were asked to research approaches to policy and standards for archiving websites. Various strategies are currently debated and being tested in libraries and archives around the world.

This assessment approach was inspired by Theo Thomassen in his paper *Modelling And Re-Modelling Archival Education And Training* presented at the 2001 European Conference for Archival Educators and Trainers. He noted that student-centred learning requires the educator to design programs that encourage students to actively take charge of their learning by selecting resources and applying their studies of the subject in some way. Learning moves from abstracted, knowledge-based learning to learning that reflects context and usage of the information in appropriate ways (Thomassen, 2001).

Learner-centred education is most appropriate for living and working in the information society. These students will graduate to work in organisations which have as their mission preserving and making accessible archival records: providing high quality information services based on authentic evidential records. In order to do so in an environment where technology changes rapidly and standards must evolve equally rapidly in order to

cope with change, students must internalize the skills and habits of lifelong independent learning. They must learn to evaluate sources and resources and effectively share their knowledge. Kang (1998, p.317) notes that the use of computer-mediated communication in learning supports an individual's self-reflective activities, which can be exercised through electronic journals, discussion groups and interactive debates. It is the second of these three that I have concentrated upon using, taking the opportunity offered by Edith Cowan University's early development of the Virtual Campus which enabled easy communication between tutor and students and among students too. The Virtual campus, which provided asynchronous electronic discussion boards, broke the confinement of the one-to-one communication that email encourages and enabled widely scattered students to discuss their studies and make online friendships. The eCourse Forums continue and enhance these opportunities for students to communicate among themselves as well as with their tutor.

Asking students to share the results of their reading seems to have been even more helpful than I hoped it would be. Metadata standards and management are difficult concepts for students to understand. Encouraging them to look critically at their reading and share their 'successes' in coming to grips with this topic provided a much more lively forum than I had hoped for. My plan was to ensure that individuals were exposed to a wider range of articles on the topic than they would read for themselves, but the issue of the value of metadata standards as well as the process of developing standards provoked a lively discussion, which I had not foreseen. Students came to the realization through

the discussion that even formal tools such as standards are not set in stone and may be critically evaluated and improved upon. Although somewhat serendipitous, this more free-ranging discussion led them to realize the positive value of professional discussion. In the final problem I deliberately provided a choice between issues of preserving static and dynamic websites in the problem concerning archiving websites, knowing that there were students from both library (static publications) and archival (dynamic, transaction-centred recordkeeping) backgrounds involved. I did this with some trepidation, thinking that there was a danger that the two groups might be so far apart in their opinions that discussion would die. I need not have worried. Although differences in opinion were clearly apparent in the discussions, I think both groups came to a better understanding of each others' priorities while acknowledging that the dangers of loss of cultural heritage and business evidence are equally great.

Student D commented:

Topic number 3 on archiving websites was the most professionally challenging. My views coming from a records and archives background were challenged by the students from a library background. It was interesting to see the way this so closely related profession could think so differently from me. This has given me an opportunity to think outside my box and look at the profession from another viewpoint.

The aim in redesigning these problems was to encourage students to:

- Search and read more widely to find a basis for their own contribution to the discussion;
- Be exposed to useful resources they may not otherwise have found;
- Be inspired to read at least some of the resources other students have presented;
- Participate more actively in discussions about the resources and solutions that have been found.

Managing online discussion forums

I set up a General Discussion Forum which can be used for social discussions as well as asking questions and providing solutions to problems encountered in the general course of studies. This General Forum is available throughout the semester alongside the Forums for discussing the assignment problems. Students are asked to introduce themselves at the beginning of semester on the General Forum as an ice-breaker. This helps to provide practice in using the Forums, overcomes initial shyness and begins the process of building a learning community. It is important to create a virtual environment that allows a student's electronic personality to emerge. Among the requirements necessary for students to do this are an ability to create a mental picture of the partner in the communications process and the ability to create a sense of presence online through the personalisation of communications (Palloff and Pratt 1999, p.22; Pratt, 1996, pp.119-120; Salmon, 2000). These initial social discussions are an important part of becoming comfortable in the group and building trust.

Student E noted in her reflection on the assignment that:

The level of interaction within the group grew significantly with the liberal use of 'kind' words and appreciation of each other's efforts. Electronic communication and dialogue is difficult to establish. It takes building trust to achieve fruitful discussion.

It is true that these electronic discussions do not often flow along conversational lines. However, I believe they do something much more valuable: they help to introduce the students to their new professional culture and milieu, and begin to build a network that is open to students in a physical classroom, but denied students in a traditional distance education course, because they would never otherwise 'meet' or engage in professional discussion. Kang (1998,p.317) notes that

The process of meaning negotiation is critical because it broadens students' understanding and moves them closer to full membership in a group of people who speak a common language. As a result of continuous participation in the community of practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1993) the learner becomes acculturated to the community and acquires its unique ways of thinking, behaving and discussing.

This is confirmed by the fact that students who have experienced these assignments based on discussion Forums, where they must make at least an initial contribution and demonstrate subsequent participation in the discussion, are in later units much more likely to use Forums in which participation is voluntary. In these General Forums they start unprompted discussions on issues they come across in their studies, ask for advice on technological problems, ask for reassurance that their

understanding of a particular issue is correct and seek help in finding resources or definitions that have so far eluded them.

Experience has shown that to make discussion-based assignments manageable for the students the discussion groups must be small. If there are more than ten students, the amount of reading required to keep up with discussions is formidable. Students may read the other groups' Forums, because the aim is to expose them to as wide a range of ideas as possible, but they are asked to contribute only to their own group's discussions. However, if the groups are too small the discussion also runs the risk of dying, so if a number of students drop out of the course for any reason the tutor may have to consider redistributing students to other groups.

Encouraging students to reflect on their learning

In the past, I have asked students to give me voluntary feedback on their learning. I did this for my own purposes, to help my understanding of the benefits and problems involved in assessments using online discussions. The students were very generous and helpful in their comments, responding in detail at a time when they were engaged in preparation for examinations. It seemed clear that the process of thinking over their learning experience was valuable to the students too. Moon (1999, p.167) notes that reflection can be

... a means of upgrading learning and enable more mature learners to become aware of how they can use reflective techniques to upgrade their previous less organized but valid levels of knowledge and understanding. Similarly, they will

understand how reflection in the representation of learning can enhance the quality of learning as well as deepen its meaning.

In 2003, I asked students to reflect upon their own learning as part of the assessment requirements. They were asked to include in their final submission for the assignment "a short reflection on how your thoughts and opinions have developed as a result of the discussions and whether or not the discussion process has assisted your learning in this unit".

Students raised the following points in their reflections:

Student F

The most useful learnings came from fellow students' initial contributions as it helped to see what others think and clarified problems and issues. The discussions also added to my learning by prolonging my thinking through the issues.

Student G

I found the discussions valuable, informative and sometimes challenging, although also a lot of work.

Student H

It was interesting to move through the three discussions and then realise how interrelated the issues were. The whole issue of electronic recordkeeping continues to have an air of uncertainty about it, and a sense of only just being able to cope with the implications of rapid technological change and what that implies for evidential requirements,

and the long-term access to archives.

With such a new area of thought for me, it was great to gain the additional basic knowledge by writing up my original posting and then seeing how other people had approached the topic; each person (some with practical experience, others like me with none) bringing something new to the discussion.

Conclusion

I am now convinced that asking students to reflect on their learning is particularly useful to them in developing their awareness of their learning as well as to my evaluation of teaching strategies. I am delighted with the way students clearly gained confidence as they researched topics and found that they then had a sound basis for putting forward their own opinions, as well as learning from others' research. This new-found willingness to engage in professional debate will stand them in good stead for the rest of their careers.

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