Building Student Engagement: Integrating the Discussion Forum
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ABSTRACT
Engage students; integrate technology; these are the 21st century imperatives. Preparing students today is markedly different than that of past decades. The world of work is changing; as a result, the skills of those who wish to succeed in it must change to meet the needs. To provide differentiated instruction, to build technology in the contemporary classroom, is more challenging than ever before, given the rapidly increasing rate of technological improvement. Educators are linking knowledge, skills, and technology in the developed world. The net results have proved to be positive. What about technology integration in the classrooms in Lebanon? Indeed, what is the educator integrating at the MBA level? How much knowledge, skills, and technology? Collaboration can provide a seamless support system as can student-faculty involvement. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of innovatively integrating the discussion forum on student engagement at the graduate level. Case assessment was conducted. Implications and recommendations were made.

Keywords: Integrating Technology; Student Engagement; Knowledge; Skills; Abilities; Differentiated Instruction; Student-Faculty Involvement; Contemporary Classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION
Students are jumping off the wall; talking, texting, playing on their I-pods, gaming on their I-phone, or on Skype in an audiovisual context. They are not engaged in learning. They are miles off. Other students may be more seem to be engaged in the class room activity, but they are distracted by the latest 3-D movie, a new rock singer, or simply the lunch break. They also may be distracted for other personal reasons as family-related issues. In all cases, a hard fact is that a quarter of the students may be off task, at any time. Even though the educator is task-oriented, providing content coverage, students are disengaged [1][2]. They are not actively thinking about or working with or ultimately using what is being presented [3][4]. How do educators get the students off the wall?

Strategies abound; tasks and activities have been generated to increase students’ active participation [5][6][7]. Student engagement in the learning process is a key behavior that refers to the amount of time and effort students devote to learning in the classroom. Their engagement rate is when students are actively engaged in learning the material being taught; it is students actually on task, occupied with the instructional material, and involved in the activities at hand. In this case study, undergraduate university business students’ engagement is evaluated in line with their discussion forum performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
Preparing learners in the 21st century is different than that of the past decades [8][9]. The immediate environment is shaped by rapid transformation: the manner in which work is conducted has changed; as a result, the skills needed to serve it have consistently and dynamically been reshaped [5]. Engaging the third millennium student in coursework is challenging [10] because they are at times themselves challenging [11].

It is held that students’ confusion/cognition/conflict in their social and physical environment may be a stimulus for learning. This conflict influences the reorganization and the nature of what is learned. Constructivist teaching strategies emphasize integrating the students’ direct experiences and the dialogue of the classroom as instructional tools [12]. Educators are no longer the source of knowledge rather they act as facilitators, guides, coaches, promoting a learning climate that broadens students’ experiences. In such a T/L environment, students have opportunities to negotiate meaning and to collaborate: students are exposed to multiple perspectives and have opportunities to actively construct, refine, and take ownership of what they “see” and the significance they derive from it [8]. Such knowledge is complex, personal, and insightful, allowing them to transfer it “outside the box,” beyond the textbook and classroom. A constructivist teaching/learning (T/L) approach is thus one which understands that learners may be more engaged in learning when situated in a richly textured context, one reflective of their natural environment whereby inquiry is the channel facilitating the cognitively based approach to learning [12].

Then, in an inquiry-based learning environment students are engaged in a hands-on subject-related question, problem, or investigation, during which they observe, question, and gather information to test their understanding in an ongoing and active process [13]. At the forefront of engaging contemporary students in learning may be modifying the structure of the task and the cognitive demands placed on them in order to motivate them functionally or to inspire their intellectual curiosity and thus to lead to student success rate. Fosnot (2005) held that effective teachers organize and plan instruction to yield moderate-to-high success rate but also challenge their students to go beyond the lesson/content and construct their own meaning from the content given whereby student success rate is the rate at which students understand and correctly complete exercises and assignments. Moderate to high success rate may produce mastery of lesson content. The students’ success rates may be seen as a foundation to apply what students have learned in order to reason, to problem solve, and to think critically and independent of content.
Technology is constantly changing and new technological developments may have profound effects on education, as in the case of the Web [7]. The importance of integrating technology in education starting from the moment the child steps into school has been emphasized in the developed world. The findings consistently reveal that computer-assisted education has benefits [14][15][16]. According to Bates (2005), the choice of technology used should not be driven by its novelty but by the needs of the learners and the context in which they are working whereby learners may work individually or collaboratively. Challenging the student to go beyond the lesson content may very well come from using Web 2.0 tools, the participatory web, where students use tools that are web-based and collaborative.

It is held that while students use Web 2.0 tools daily, in their personal lives, they are not given the opportunity to do so in their classrooms. Berger & Trexler (2010) claim that students using Web 2.0 tools may have a profound effect on their learning potential because, for example, the discussion forum may promote communication, collaboration, and creativity. If students have internet connection, they can use the discussion forum 24/7 since Web 2.0 is web-based. Learning that integrates Web 2.0 tools is grounded in constructivism because students build information based on what is known, constructing new concepts and pragmatic knowledge, based on their hands-on experiences. Moreover, problem-based-learning integrates the constructivist approach. These are student-centered and place the student in charge of learning whereby inquiry-based methods are used to further develop understanding regarding specific real-world and relevant issues. Collaboration and student-teacher involvement are significant to the process of online learning in discussion forums which may have a significant effect on varied learning outcomes [17][18]. The discussion forum helps in knowledge construction, exploring thoughts, challenging ideas, deepening social networking, flexible interaction, creating a secure context, and self-development [19][20] especially if driven by student inquiry [21]. In short, students may use the Web 2.0 tools as the discussion forum to work collaboratively.

3. METHODOLOGY

The section below covers the purpose of the study, the research questions, the participants, the procedures used in the study, the research design, tools, and analysis of data used.

3.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to prove that by increasing students’ level of engagement through a constructivist teaching/learning context, students’ level of online collaborative performance and student-teacher online interaction will significantly increase. The case study seeks to answer the following:

Hypothesis One: Students’ performance in their collaborative assignment based on the discussion forum was significantly higher those who were engaged in the collaborative assignment off-line.

Research Question One: Do students engage more in student-faculty interaction when they work collaboratively on the discussion forum than those who engage in collaborative work that is off-line.

3.2 Procedure

The procedure adopted in this study covered the path taken by the two groups of participants from two different undergraduate business management courses taught by the practitioner-researcher: (1) The control participants worked collaboratively off-line and (2) The experimental participants worked collaboratively on-line.

- Off-Line Collaborative Work: The second week of the semester, the participants were placed in pairs in order for them to develop their assignment collaboratively using a frontal approach [18]. The participants were told that their teacher would provide continuous support as each pair worked on its assignment; first, they needed to search for and select the research topic; then, gain the teacher’s approval; conduct the analytic research based on primary and secondary information/live events; debate and challenge each others’ opinion; integrate the critical analysis; and, then, present the written assignment in class at the end of the semester.
- On-Line Collaborative Work: The second week of the semester, the participants were paired and placed in the on-line collaborative work groups. The participants were told that their teacher would provide continuous support online throughout the semester as each pair worked on-line to complete the assignment. Each pair needed to follow a series of steps, together, online: searching for and selecting the research topic, having it approved by the teacher, conducting the analytic research based on secondary sources and live events, debating, challenging each others’ point of view, and then integrating their opinion to present the collaborative work in class at the end of the semester.

3.3 Participants

The 28 participants belonged to one graduate course taken at the business faculty at a small but growing institute of higher education in the Middle East. They were MBA students taking a management course which included research work: 17 were male and 11 were female. These participants were divided into a control and an experimental group: one in which the work was done collaboratively in a face-to-face manner off-line and the second in which the work was done collaboratively on-line using the discussion forum on Blackboard.

3.4 Design

The research was conducted as a case study in that it investigated a relatively few number of issues, covering
The case study found that the participants' performance in their collaborative assignment based on engagement in the discussion forum was significantly higher than those who were engaged in the collaborative assignment off-line (t-test=10.73; p<0.05). The Hypothesis was supported. A key factor related to engagement and success is related to how much time and effort participants pour into their work [24][25]. Some feedback from the participants' work sheds some light on how they perceived their online discussion forum in terms of those two factors. Some participants simply shared when they engaged in the discussion forum, “Karl and I get on the forum around 10:00 p.m. because it’s the time we get home and get online;” Others commented on engaging in learning as a step-by-step approach, “Dr. working on the discussion forum is so different from face-to-face; we have to learn how to do it: once we are in, I cannot stop chatting.” Then, based on what the participants indicated concerning their assignment on the forum, it was about talking things over, debating, arguing, and then finding some middle ground. Their discussion was really richly textured: It was constructivist [12][13]: It was reaching higher-level thinking skills because each participant was driven by the same objective, a successful course assignment [26][27]. A few participants told the practitioner-researcher how similar working on the discussion forum was to what they did in their leisure time, “Dr. I really like it: Its’ like MSN, like Twitter or maybe more like Face book. This is social networking. I love it!” In short, some of the participants were engaged in learning/performing successfully because for them it was similar to social networking. For others, it was a new way to get the assigned paper done; the more they engaged, the better their outcome [28][29][30].

The results showed that participants engaged more in student-faculty interaction when they worked collaboratively on the discussion forum than those who engaged in collaborative work that is off-line (87% versus 20%). The research question was supported. It is held that teacher presence is the ability of a teacher to support or enhance social and cognitive presence through instructional management, building understanding and direct instruction. The participants may have engaged in increased interaction with their teacher to provide a level of security in the new learning context as has been noted by researchers [31][32]. In the traditional learning context, in which participants were educated, the teacher is perceived as the source of knowledge and procedure and order; she is the course and classroom authority figure, ensuring that objectives are met consistently [33][34][35]. Some examples of student-faculty interaction are drawn from the transcript to point to key behaviors displayed as the participants engaged on the virtual office hour: “Dr. We need you to be with us: we want to go over how we should discuss the key ideas of our assignment with you. Could we meet on your virtual office-hour. Could we do that tomorrow? Please reserve the first half hour for us, only.” Others were more relaxed, “Hi Dr., we would like your feedback on the conclusion; please look at Thread 9. Is that a good way to close the argument?” Some participants just went online to comment on their progress, “Dr. So far Tony and I have done the first two steps; tonight we’d like to
check with you on how we plan to do step three.” What can be drawn from the transcripts of the online office hours were two key factors: the teacher had to maintain a social presence, and she had to be a source of knowledge; however, it seems that she was there more on a human, personal, counselor, coach, and facilitator than as an authority figure. “Learning is a very human activity...The more human needs are taken into account, the more they are likely to learn, and learn to learn”[36].

To conclude, with emerging technology, the class room has changed. Collaboration in education is understood as communities in education, working together in a joint intellectual effort [37][38] which the participants in the case study successfully achieved as they engaged in the discussion forum and the virtual office-hour.

5. CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded from this case study that the participants gained success best when they engaged collaboratively in their online assignment: It was a new challenging assignment in a new challenging setting. As they worked on their course assignment on the discussion forum, student-to-student and student-to-teacher, the net result was synergy. Moreover, the participants who were business majors gained multiple skills which are essential in the new globalized marketplace network because online collaboration is the watchword of the future [39]. Collaboration has taken center stage [40] whereby multinational corporations rely on teams to accomplish the work that makes them thrive and be successful [41].

A number of limitations were met in the research study. First, the sample selected were homogeneous in terms of age, gender, and nationality. Second, the participants were mainly business students; as such, they may have similar attitude towards using certain features of the Course Management System, Blackboard which other fields of study may not. Third, other limitations met in this study were the sample size, the teaching semester selected, the inexperience graduate-level business students may have in dealing with the discussion forum and the university’s Course Management System. Moreover, many of the participants were not comfortable with on-line communication stemming from their fear of incompetence, unwillingness to learn, social economic status, academic history, family income, access to the internet, and work commitments.

In spite of the limitations met, the practitioner-researcher believes that two recommendations can be drawn from the case study. First, she believes that learning to work with others needs to be en-cultured earlier on in the educational context as the benefits drawn are manifold in their academic context and in the business world. Second, she recommends further development of the online discussion forum since the value gained through active engagement in social networking skills, as noted by many researchers, is perceived as being the keystone of business [42][43][28].

REFERENCES


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