Close Encounters – University Course at Lunarstorm

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Abstract
During autumn 2004, a course equivalent to 7.5 ECTS credits was located to the Internet community of LunarStorm, a website of the greatest importance of its kind in Sweden. The purpose was to let the students get a deeper understanding through an ethnographic perspective. Many of the functions that the website provides were used in order to communicate in different ways and unexpected positive results arose. The evaluation of the course indicated that the ethnographic perspective had functioned as it was meant to, but also that the group developed a spirit of community that resulted in other interesting and positive spin off effects.

Keywords: Constructivism, online learning, communities, personalization, communication

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report on findings made during a course on the subject of net cultures. The course was located to the community LunarStorm as an attempt to let the students have more opportunities to learn about the subject, how young people use the internet. At the beginning of the semester, the students protested against being forced to use LunarStorm, a website they considered childish and disorganized, and asked for a more traditional way of communication, i.e. FirstClass. After a while however, the students reconsidered, expressed appreciation and encouraged continues use of LunarStorm in this course.

Description of the course

The objective of this course was to learn more about what children and young people do on the internet. The platform used for communication during the course was the website LunarStorm, the largest net community in Sweden. There were four different fields of assignments given as frames for the fundamental content of the course: technical matters, games, Law-Legal Problems related to Information technology and net communities. Students produced their own questions within the fields and answered each others questions. The central activities when they conducted their tasks were self-reflection and connection to adequate literature. They were also making an evaluation of a modern computer game.

The last assignment, the strategy assignment, developed continuously during the course. It related to the experiences from the other assignments and was issued from the students own working field. The strategy had to be commented on by an employee of a learning environment, i.e. a principal of a school, avoiding the strategy to be a desk product.

LunarStorm as a platform for the course

From a constructivist point of view, the context for a learning situation is important (Dewey 1998). In our case we chose the website LunarStorm, since it is the largest and most well-known net community in Sweden, and many young people use it on a daily basis. Due to the fact that the student used and reflected on functions, observed and reflected on phenomenon and was given first hand experiences by the surrounding environment used during the entire course, we believe conditions for learning were created in a way that won't occur as easy in other forms of education and teaching. The discovery of problems in a specific environment leads to reflection and a search for knowledge to be able to solve the upcoming problem

(Larsson, 2001).

It can be interesting to consider the importance of placing the course in an environment which is neutral in that aspect that the control of the environment is relatively equal between student and teacher. The website is not originally designed for education, but is a common and open website primarily designed to facilitate private communication. The informal and personally controlled environment is dominating for a user of LunarStorm. Some of the central functions are Lunarmail – the possibility to send messages to other users of LunarStorm, the Guestbook where all can read and give their input, and the Diary where you can choose to different levels of accessibility, open to everyone or just the ones you have on your so-called buddy list. There are also a huge amount of other functions for communication, but the ones mentioned are the primary ones that are being used during the course.

Pedagogical experiments

When developing the course, the focus has all the time been on improving the conditions for the students learning. Our definition of learning is to a great extent based on thoughts that support the theories of social constructivism. One main assumption is that meaningful learning happens when individuals are active in a social context (McMahon, 1997).

The importance of the context and culture for the perspective of knowledge is another starting-point. (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). One consequence of this is us putting the course to LunarStorm, but other methods have been used to achieve this purpose. The most important thing has been the open assignments where the students have been able to select the content of the different questions themselves. The purpose is to a certain extent making the students being able to create an answer in their own mind, when creating their question. By doing so, we believe that the prerequisite for a better quality learning increases, compared to the situation where questions that are considered are chosen by the course management in advance. We believe that this creates conditions for wider, deeper discussions with more inputs from different students on the issues that have arisen. The students have also had the opportunity to read the diary of the teachers, which in this case have been used as indirect feed-back to the students. The students have also been encouraged to write diaries of their own and write into each other's guest-books - this being voluntary though. Another voluntary assignment has been called "The Question of the Week" and has been used by the course management to catch any current questions or to put a deeper perspective on something that has been seen in one of the students' diary or in a forum. This way there has been a opportunity for the students to have an decisive impact on the content of the course, not only as suggestions in an final evaluation.

Experiences from the fall semester

In total 17 students where registered for the course (of 30 applicants) and 8 of these followed through, which means a throughput of 47%. Within the course two obvious groups appeared. One active group which had a high level of communication between each other and one passive group which to a varied extent performed the tasks of the course but behaving passive in both the common discussions and having few contacts with their fellow students as well.

One essential hypothesis for the design of the course is that there is a positive relationship between social activities (with regards to communication student to student) in a course and

learning, where more active cooperation between students has impact towards a deeper understanding. This change of paradigm has grown during the last

decade (Jonassen, Peck and Wilson, 1999). With this background, we report (as follows) a lot of things that we find interesting and worth shedding light upon. It needs to be said, that

for all observations more research is needed as well as more basic data to verify these relations scientifically.

What we have experienced is that there is a relation between student use of the informal area and activity in the formal. More informal communication meant more activity in common discussions. Here we can draw a parallel to the importance of activities besides lectures and seminars that help students get to know each other during physical meetings on online courses. Those who were active in social activities like writing comments in others guest-books or reading others diaries also were they who answered most frequently on "the Question of the Week" or answered each others contributions.

Our experience from ordinary online courses is that there is a lower frequency of drop outs amongst the students for those who have had physical meetings with social activities, compared to those who have not – or those that have had no meetings whatsoever. In our course at LunarStorm, the communication at the informal arena is here replacing such happenings. We can notice a connection between activity and completing the course and marks on the course – the students with higher activity had a higher standard of performance and got higher marks in the end. Amongst the inactive most of the students dropped out for several reasons.

A third connection, somewhat surprising here (in a website designed primarily for young people) is the correlation between age and activity – higher age meant higher activity. Here a hypothesis can be that older students have more experience and it is more likely for them to have opinions, while the younger students keep a lower profile since they feel they do not have much to give to the group – a kind of lurking.

A fourth connection is the relationship between activity and when the student started the course; where late admitted students were more active compared to those that started by the beginning of the semester. Finally, those who in the end got the best result at the course were those who were older (35 an over) and admitted late. They were active, they related to each other and they formed a community together.

In general the course got positive evaluations from the students. They pointed out some things that they felt were of importance for experiencing the course as beneficial. Above all they felt that the possibilities to communicate with others strengthened the community between students. Also the construction of the assignments as well as the feedback they got from the teachers – both direct through feedback on their given reports but also indirectly by something the management wrote in the diary and could be read by all. This behaviour was something that many of the students copied. The possibility to read each other's diaries could be a key factor that creates possibilities for a social community that otherwise could be difficult to reach in a course that is all online.

Another part that can we think have been stimulating a higher activity is the Question of the Week. Here we find comments from the students appreciating the fact that it was voluntary, so they could answer out of knowledge and interest. They also wrote that they recognized that the management had caught some thoughts in the students diaries and guest books and used those as Question of the Week to deepen the aspect or focus and inform on something that the students had expressed thoughts upon.

At LunarStorm there is also a possibility to define and adjust levels for the students. This was used during the fall semester to indicate the level of marks they had in the course. There were 5 different levels, passive, failed, passed, passed+ and passed with honours. We thought that this function would have little, marginal or no impact, but would simple be used as an example of the graduation system that many net communities have. But in spite of this, quite of few students expressed that they got strong and positive feelings when they moved up a grade while some expressed deep dissatisfaction when moved down.

Experiences from the spring semester

Based on experiences from the first semester, quite a few changes were made in the beginning of the spring semester to increase the conditions for learning. An extended and clear students´ guide was written; certain assignments were widened and an experiment started to let the old students "follow along" in the new course. The experiment was to let the old student's functions as student mentors or "minglers" as we have chosen to call them. The purpose was to transfer the feeling of social community that developed during the fall semester into the spring semester. The minglers were there voluntary. They decided themselves how active they would be, they got no payment for this and they can disappear whenever they want or when the management closes them off in case of bad interference in some way.

One conclusion from the previous semester was to try to get the students to write their own diary and read each others diaries, since we experienced that this was a main reason for the good spirit of community between the students in the active group. Therefore it became mandatory in the spring course for students to make diary entries, to get the writing itself going, and also the reading of other's diaries. It was shown that the latter was more difficult than expected, when many students expressed that it felt forbidden to read other's diaries. Here we can see a very obvious change of paradigm between the generations, since the function diary at LunarStorm is used much more openly by the younger generation compared to how the older generation used their analogy, bound book diaries. We in the course management have tried to influence the students to use their diaries in a more flexible way by reading their diaries on a regular basis as well as writing a small comment on the context of their diaries. We have done this also due to the fact that they would get as much feedback as possible, to create closeness between the course management and help the students to experience activity in the course.

In the end, we also changed the use of member's level of belonging to a club. Instead of showing marks, the scale was changed to show only those assignments that were accomplished to a satisfactory level. Here we chose a somewhat informal way of expressing approval of the tasks. These were "Minglers" (that was access status for everyone) "Lunar-journeyman" (which you became when you had made some initial, fundamental assignments for the using of LunarStorm) "Tech- and game expert" (when they were approved on the Technique and game tasks) "ICT-lawyer" (when they were approved on the ICT-judicial assignment) plus "Culture strategist" (when they were approved on the assignment of net community). In order to be transferred to the fourth level "ICT-lawyer", students had to be approved on the assignments for the three first levels.

Conclusions

Our fundamental hypothesis is that strong social contacts between students leads up to a better environment for studies which then leads to deeper learning; something that could be connected to the theory of social constructive theory. Therefore it becomes very interesting to use a platform which primarily is designed and developed to stimulate communication and which stimulates possibilities for this in different ways. Both through observations made by us in the course management and through reading the evaluations from the students, support the hypotheses but here a more research is necessary to be able to describe this area in a closer perspective.

Based upon the experiences from this course, the general issues to consider while designing online courses are:

- Use a course environment that is dominated by informal functions that students can control and that support social community and where the course is located as a sub function. The students should be able to personalize their "spaces" to a large degree.

- Go for diaries/blogs for both teachers and students and let hem be open for everyone and create conditions to comment upon these both open to public and in private.
- Create tasks that stimulate creativity and constructive thinking and create assignments with possibilities for feedback from both teachers and students.
- Check if previous students want to act as mentors for new students.
- The course management should develop a working culture of quick direct and indirect feedback
- Be prepared to change in the course as it goes along.

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