

Using the Internet for Professional Development

Abstract

This paper reports on a short course that used the Internet in the context of a professional peer group learning environment. The course made use of the WebCT conferencing system. This system allows messages to be kept in a central location. As it is asynchronous, a receiver can read a message and respond to it at a time convenient to them. Extracts from different forums are presented that provide examples of the types of communication that took place and participants perceived advantages and disadvantages of online communication.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report on an online course that made use of the Internet for Professional Development. In this paper, I hope to show how teachers can make use of the Internet in a peer group environment to develop their teaching practice and gain professional support from their colleagues.

I participated in the course to get hands on experience of using a collaborative learning tool and to explore with other colleagues how this type of technology could be used for Professional Development. At present, much emphasis is placed on how students can use the Internet. However, there are few examples of how teacher use technology to communicate with other colleagues to develop their own work performance.

The challenge for us, therefore, is to develop appropriate ways of using the Internet as a means of assisting teachers to reflect on their own classroom practice and to share ideas, concerns and experiences with colleagues, in order to improve their classroom practice.

Outline

Firstly, I intend to describe the background to the course. Next, I will explain how the World Wide Web course tool (WebCT) works. This was the tool used for the online course. Then, I will describe the various features of the bulletin board. Next, I will outline the contents of the Professional Development course. Excerpts from the discussion will be presented as examples of the type of communication that took place. Finally, I will report on the participants perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online course.

Background

The course in Professional Development was organized by the University of Sheffield. Twenty people took part in the course, which lasted for 8 weeks, during the spring term of 1998. The participants came from Education, Health, and Training, and had varying degrees of expertise of using technology in the workplace. All of the participants were interested in using the Internet to interact in a professional capacity with other colleagues. The emphasis of the course was on group communication rather than simply accessing the Internet for information.

WebCT – What is it?

WebCT is an authoring environment and is being developed at the University of British Columbia for the construction of Web-based courses. A web server is used for the creation and delivery of a course and access to a networked computer and a web browser enables the student to connect to the WebCT server and participate in the course.

When you log onto the course you are presented with a screen with icons leading to different sections: i.e. Course glossary; About this course; Help; Bulletin board and Phases of the Course.

Bulletin Board Features

The window is divided into 3 frames. The left frame contains (!) listing options, (2) the top right frame contains a listing of the messages, and (3) the bottom right frame contains the current selected messages.

The Bulletin board is the area where the discussion takes place. It is divided into different forums. A forum is an area where participants can send and view messages to each other on a topic of interest to them.

When you enter the Bulletin board area, the system presents all the new messages that have been sent. However, old messages can be searched for using different search techniques i.e. based on senders, name, content of message etc. All messages are presented either by subject, or by time of posting. A threading feature allows the user to read each message in sequence, or by time of posting. A threading feature allows the user to read each message in sequence or according to topic. Web addresses can be types into the message and when selected, the required page is displayed. An asterisks (*) next to a forum name means that it is a private forum and can only be accessed by participants assigned to that forum.

What the Bulletin Board offers

1. Ability to post a message – this is done by starting a new thread, or by replying to an existing message.
2. Read messages – unread messages are always displayed when the bulletin board is initially accessed.
3. Search for or list messages – that provides a list of all unread messages in all forums.

Course Content

This professional Development course was divided into three forums. The Main forum was for all participants to introduce themselves, and for any other notices that the facilitator or students wanted to add during the course. The Notes forum was used for discussion on the topics from course material which was included in the phases of the course section and finally, the Learning sets forums were for smaller groups to get together and explore topics in more detail and to share detailed information concerning their work.

Excerpts from Main Forum (Introduction)

The participants spent the first week of the course getting used to the WebCT environment and exploring the course material topics. They also used this week to introduce themselves to the group. In these examples, participants talk about their work, their experience of using technology and other professional points.

1. Hello, I have posted most of my introduction from my home page – where there is also a photo! At work, I am mostly interested in using IT to support teaching and learning. I have taught in schools, both here and in other countries, and for the last seven years or so I have been at the University of Sheffield and involved in the professional development of teachers and other professionals.
2. I think the reasons I'm here are in part because I am fascinated by the potential for information retrieval. I'm also intrigued by the use of the computer and the net for personal communication. And finally I guess I've always taken the view that if something is new it is worth exploring.

Excerpts from Notes Forum (Attitudes and experiences of technology)

The Notes forum was based around the topics in the course material. The aim of the forum was that participants could read relevant material on a topic, for example, 'Attitudes and experiences of technology' and they could reflect on work, share experiences and learn from each other, as is evident from the following:

1. Children play and then learn, adults tend to do something else that I cannot find a term for. The concept of browsing, hanging out and playing are all

about spontaneous, opportunistic patterns. It is essential in the frontier town of the Internet and is I believe a sign of health.

2. Your point about the desire to play with the technology highlights an important area that I think we tend to neglect as professional trainers and educators. Learning should be FUN. It always seems odd that we say we have to call for the seven year old when the TV programme doesn't do what we want or we can't get the software to work. They don't have the fear of failure that we have. So they hit the keys and pull the buttons and sometimes something doesn't work but then it doesn't matter, if the worst comes to the worst you switch it off and start again. Over the years as a lecturer and trainer it has worried me that even students in their final year tend to look for the right answer and to want to be taught rather than to learn.

Excerpts from Learning Sets Forum (ICT and Work)

Participants formed into smaller learning sets and explored, in detail, areas of common interest. In this example, they discussed the theme of ICT and work. The asynchronous nature of the WebCT conferencing system meant that responses could be made at a time convenient to each participant.

1. Through reading the notes and some other work I have been doing on professional development I have been thinking about how Professional Development relates to change, in ourselves, in organizational practices through the way we work, in new things we initiate as part of or a result of PD or even in the profession itself. How can ICT lead to the sort of PD that leads to critical enquiry and therefore changing practice?
2. The notion of act, reflect, revise and share is possible with ICT and is central to action research/professional development. WE can use ICT to share ideas, prepare articles collaboratively and ask for advice. CMC allows the critical enquiry to include other viewpoints and not just our own.
3. I agree that the main benefit of ICT for professional development is the ability to engage in the reflective process with others. The next question is perhaps how can this shared experience be brought about. Do people prefer to communicate online with people who they have had, or have ongoing, face to face contact with as well?

Excerpts from Comments about the Course

At the end of the course, participants were asked to comment on what they liked and disliked about the online course.

Advantages

1. I enjoyed the feeling that this technology can reach out across physical and social space and a course taken in the whole world is really exciting and possible. All in all, a really good experience – thanks to all the generosity of participants. (if I could send a picture or a song or a video or ...something

other than just words that would feel like a more appropriate way of expressing myself.

2. I was able to get my head round this type of use of the internet as well as having my eyes opened through the discussion about the potential for online communication.

Disadvantages

1. There was a LOT of learning about the technology. I agree about the frustration inherent in the technology. Maybe this is a function of WebCT, which seems to have been designed on the principle of linearity – which isn't how we actually communicate.
2. It would have been good to share pictures, video and audio but I suppose there would have to be a good reason to do this i.e. related to the course materials. Like most people it took some time to get used to WebCT. Overall I really enjoyed the course.

Conclusions

In this paper we saw an example of how the Internet was used to facilitate peer group learning. We examined, in detail, the practical ways of using the Internet for this purpose. WE read sample excerpts from course participants, which showed typical interaction, attitudes and difficulties, likes and dislikes of the participants regarding the use of the Internet. Technical hurdles will occur and time is needed for participants to get used to the technology.

Overall, there was a positive response from the participants to using the Internet for online communication. There was enthusiasm about being able to communicate online with people in different locations, and being able to receive various perspectives on course materials. The potential of sharing audio and video messages should further enhance this learning environment.

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