The role of discussion forums in developing e- learning community among students and instructors: test in univeristy of Baghdad - Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This study will focus on discuss the role of discussion forums in developing and keep on communities of e-learning as well as fostering and strengthened students' learning skills and knowledge along with the instructors .It conducted on an online course at the University of Baghdad. The course was delivered via Moodle to using discussion forums as a major communication tool. A survey assessing students' attitudes as a core factor toward discussion forums was occurring. The outcomes presented a positive attitude toward discussion forums and their role in developing and enhancing students' study skills and knowledge. This study proposes strategies for implementing successful discussion forums.

Introduction

For two decades roughly, exactly in 1990s onward, numbers of observers have been pointed to several phenomena in electronic space that have occupied the world significantly. One of the extreme importance phenomena is the emergence of the so-called e-communities that evolved with the advent of the Internet. The e-communities were characterized in terms the penetration and forming rapidly one after another, with some of rules to follow, especially via creating social network interaction that varied with multiple targets. Most recent studies have some of the indicators that the creation of successful, acceptance, and sustainable e-community is considered a decisive and a key element in the prosperity of the teaching-learning process over the internet [1]. Therefore, e-community plays a role as a kernel in establishing e-learning. This study will look at a lot of the factors that must be managed to create e-learning programs to achieve real skill and knowledge, this community of e-learning is evolving, and boost levels of student satisfaction are found. It will showcase-study at the University of Baghdad on creating and managing e-learning communities, based on improving interaction and collaboration between student with each others on one hand and instructors in other through discussion forums in an online course like Moodle.

The purpose of the study

According to the assumption that for e-learning to be successful in terms the development , collaboration , and engagement of its e-community has to be successful as well, this paper examines the effects of discussion forums in enhancing and evolving e-learning communities. Its aim is to examine the students' attitudes toward using discussion forums compared to the multi elements of communication and interaction in e-learning such as (chat, e-mail, whiteboard, and discussion forums). The study will also explain the types of student learning skills, knowledge, and role of the instructor in collaboration and attitude that were developed through this process.

The research questions

This study will address the following questions:
● How effective are discussion forums in developing and enhancing e- community in a course online?
● How effective are discussion forums, from the point of view students, in outstanding learning skills and knowledge?
● How do discussion forums affect on the role of the instructor?
● What are the suitable strategies to achieve discussion forums successfully and effectively in the e-learning process?

Terms used in the study

a)E-learning

Is a learning program as asynchronous that makes use of an information network, such as the Internet and multimedia, for course delivery, interaction, and/or facilitating the learning process in different learning environments and not constraints of time or space such as MOODLE, blogging tools, social networks, etc.? Web-based learning is a subset of e-learning and refers to learning using an Internet browser, such as Internet Explorer [1].

b)E-Community

A term used in this study synonymously with cyber community. It is the place where participants' relations are made via the media of electronic networks without restrictions, such as time, space, gender, age, or race. It is a center constituted by multiple individuals' interests and understanding to create their own e-personalities [2]. According to [3]for this e-personality to come out it must able to:
1.Hold an internet discussion in order to formulate responses;
2.Contribute to an internal sense of privacy;
3.Contribute a sense of presence online with the colleagues;
4.Make emotional issues on the other side of the line pending finish discussion.

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c) Discussion forums

This is termed usually used with discussion between groups or discussion lists. According to [4], a discussion which conducting between groups to give a good opportunity for keeping on electronic conversation among a group of people .Threaded discussion between groups allow time to arrange responses highly, sustainable separate threads for continue subjects, allow everyone to talk sensible at the same time, and can manage the discussion among a lot of participants .They display some of interesting and advantages over chat and e-mail. Chat some often restricted to the irritable exchange of small ideas, promptly reactions, and emotional responses among only a few persons. While discussions among individuals in e-mail lists lack continuity and organization.

Literature review

Research on online such as (pedagogy, design, and some of facilitation demonstrates that learning is a social process, and the internet is a suitable social place [4]. Therefore, discussion by groups and online observers are a key element of enhancing e-learning. According to [3] asserted and supports this concept and sees that the creation of learning communities in the e-learning field is of huge importance and believes that this is not an easy task and requires resources like time and/or money matched with deep social and understanding of the structure. Therefore, for any e-learning test to evolve or emerge it before that must fulfill the necessary elements of a successful e-community.[5] pointed to some of these elements as follows: clearly and neatly define the aim of the group; create a special virtual gathering place for group, foster effective leadership from within; define criteria and a clear code of conduct; allow and facilitate some of sub groups, promote a range of members roles to resolve their own disagreement. There are numerous indicators of a successful e-learning test. An obvious indicator of such test is the ability of members in an e-learning community to contributing and collaboration and best skill and knowledge .Other indicators according to [6] are as follows:

1. Need for active interaction involving both course content and individual communication;
2. Need collaborative learning indicated by comments among students and instructors and directed between students themselves.
3. The meaningful is to construction of socially through agreement or questioning on certain topics;
4. Sharing among students and instructors in terms of resources;
5. Encouragement and support of shifting between students and willingness to evaluate the work of others.

In this respect an environment with the same of the attributes mentioned above can inevitably will foster robust social relationships with suitable learning process. This confirms the importance of the instructor role that needs to remain active collaboration and engaged through the learning process in order to guide students back to the aims of learning. It is the enhancing and the development of a strong learning community and not just social community that is the distinguishing aspect of e-learning [7].

Method of the study & Subject

This study was conducted at the University of Baghdad through an on-line course titled "Moodle Demonstration site CF101", for instructor offered course, categories and forums of community discussion, profile, site pages to subscribe with second year undergraduates students at the college of computer sciences in the first semester of the academic year 2012/2013

.This course was delivered and managed by the author. The total number of students was 72 and they were divided into three sections (24, 24, 24).All the previously had experience with using the internet, but none had taken any online courses like Moodle before.

Description of the course

Based at the University of Baghdad to introduce e-learning to their students, an empirical study was carried out using one the course offered by the university. The author was given the task to undertake this study as senior searcher. Certain norm was set for choosing a course of this study such as that the course is mainly theoretical and the participants taking it should have some experience in using the internet to embrace Moodle as a one of e-learning tools. Based on these norms, CF101 was the most suitable course of this study and which was taught in English. The course was completely was delivered over the internet via Moodle and using some requirements and software packages to be installed for course design such as (SCORM package, Apache, etc...) along with a web server (See Figure 1,2) .Furthermore, students who may be hesitant to speak in class may flood online discussion forums interactive asynchronously with good ideas through e-learning when freed from the pressure of an audience (Fryer, 2002). The instructor dedicated the first three weeks of course for training the students on the course software in a traditional face-to-face setup and solicit students to registration on Moodle. After that, the instructor met the students to using Moodle and online several communication tools through course to come out with perfect discussion forums.

Figure1. "Course main page"

Figure 2."Teacher page with course"

The communication tools included discussion forums, email, calendar announcements, chat forum, and a whiteboard. During the course, all participants from students were introduced to a new lecture per week. Moreover they had to read assigned topic dealing with that lecture and discuss it later with their peers and instructor in designing discussion forum. Meanwhile

each lecture had its own discussion forum (See figure 3, 4). Participations in discussion forums were text-based; therefore students writing skills and knowledge had a direct profound impact on their communication with colleagues and instructor as well [8,9].
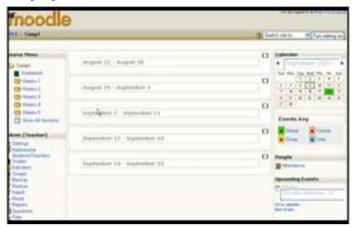

Figure 3." Compose of online course per week"

Figure 4."Compose of the discussion forums in online course"

Meanwhile, private tasks were assigned to groups of students and extra discussion forums were indicated for each group. Occasionally, students used e-mail for their questions with the instructor and their colleagues. They used chat forums and white boards less frequently. The course evaluation consisted of exams (in classroom), studies, and participation in discussion forums.

Instruments and Procedure

This is study was conducted using a survey to evaluate students' attitude towards discussion forums. The scale rated seven questions on a 2-point scale, with 1equaling *yes* and 0 equaling *no*. The survey was conducted at the first of the semester. Moreover data on student activities were collected from the" *track student*" aspect of the Moodle.

Findings

Outcomes of the student survey are explained in Table 1. The data on student's activity in the course was collected from the course management Moodle. The instructor of the course outlines extra information on student activity on the discussion forums.

Table 1. The effectiveness of discussion forums from the point of view of students

NO.	Questions	YES %	NO %
1.	Do you think participating in class discussion forums made you write neatly?	93.9	4.0
2.	Did you participate in discussion forums more in this course than in F- to- F classroom?	89.8	12.4
3.	Do you think more interesting before responding to questions in the discussion forums?	95.9	4.1
4.	Do you think that participating in class discussion forum better than F- to- F classroom?	66.3	32.5
5.	Do you have best connected relationships with your instructor than F-to-F classroom?	45.9	55.3
6.	Did you feel close to your colleague in discussion forums compare to F-to –F course?	37.7	63.8
7.	Would you like to have an online class discussion in your entire course?	82.7	16.9

Discussion

Generally, discussion forums had a profound impact on student learning more than any other tool. Monitoring student activity in the course explained that such communication tool allowed to:

● Practice interact with each other asynchronously more often.

● Answer each other's questions and collaborate with each other in interpretations certain concepts.

● Express about their ideas and join in discussions without hesitation even for those students who seemed not willing to participating in F-to-F classroom discussion.

● Take more time to read the questions and arranges them well.

Table 1 explains that most students strongly agree that discussion forums had enhanced their knowledge and skills in reading, writing, and assimilation. Moreover, the questionnaire indicated that students preferred online discussion through F-to-F as it had no social limitations. In addition, participants felt strong social relationship with their instructors better than their colleagues. Futhermore, more than two third of the students indicated that they have stronger social relationships with their instructors and colleagues in F-to-F course compared to the online course. Eventually, from the instructor's approach, the e-learning experience as opposite to F-to-F learning had many advantages such as:

● It is automatically shifted the role of the instructor into a facilitator, sponsored, and organizer instead center of the learning process as actually experience in most F-to-F classrooms.

● It allowed the instructor to strengthening relevance and relationship with students over discussion and e-mail.

● E-learning still requires more effort and greater time to be spent by the instructor to admin on course follow up students' collaboration and participating and returned to increase for each one in class.

● Each discussion starts with some questions or activities to brainstorming. Later, at the end of discussion period post some remarks of student discussion.

● The instructor should have a continuous and monitoring in discussion forums in order to compose students' discussion and guide them to the aims of the discussion of each session

● Assign specific interest discussion forums for other requirements such us sharing the internet and resources or assignment discussion or group discussion, etc.

Conclusion

E-learning available tremendous opportunities to educate and train. A successful an e-learning program should provide both challenge and support in all scopes for students. It should focus on creating an available safe and comfortable learning community alongside by challenging learners more intellectually [10] .Overall, the discussion is a key element of successful e-community in new environments like e-learning. With suitable strategies for implementing discussion forums. Students can feel good with the effectiveness of participation to create more connected to their e-learning community [11].

Recommendations

● Based on this test one can summary strategies for effective discussion forums and to be carried out as following?

● Make the discussion forums an important part of course requirements. In this course a 20% of the total course mark seemed to be a suitable for effective discussion participation.

● Allocate a discussion forum for each lecture in the course in order to make sure that all students follow up and discuss each lecture to avoid miss any one of them.

● Arrangement a specific period of time for discussing each session (for example one week for each). In spite of one might not prefer time limitations on discussion, from special approach it is better to impose such time limit in order to keep the students on the timetable. Moreover to insure compliance and subscription within the assigned time frame, one might to lock the discussion forum after finish time.

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