

Online Student Conferences as Assessment Instruments: A Case Study of Knowledge Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

A major change in teaching and learning in online courses is the student imparting their own knowledge on a subject to other students, lecturers and tutors and being assessed for such a task. An online student conference is discussed in this paper to illustrate this change and critically discuss and assess its potential as a student assessment instrument. This paper will discuss some current ideas on the methods and strategies for acquiring knowledge. It will then take the example of Curtin University's Internet Studies online course Internet Communities and Social Networks and discuss the conference planning and engagement process. An examination of one student's experience is given to show the potential ideal of successful knowledge acquisition which can take place. However, with this new way of learning come great advantages but also numerous disadvantages that further research will need to address. This case study shows that the 'game' of teaching and learning significantly changes when simulating real world experiences in online environments requiring much thought to the planning of learning material and tasks and management of students to stay engaged throughout the assessment process.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of assessing students has changed dramatically since online study has become the habit and practice for millions of students. Online assessment, project work and assignments done primarily or exclusively online, is now the standard in the education of many who cannot attend offline classes. This paper is a case study examining a combined undergraduate and postgraduate assessment of a student conference created as a major assessment piece in an internet studies course.

This paper suggests that the conference was an excellent way to acquire knowledge about the topic of internet networks and communities. By replicating the rules of a professional conference, from calling for papers to review, to publication, presentation and debate, this proved a valuable way of encouraging independent thought and acquiring knowledge about the many areas the topic of internet communities and networks. Yet this requires a closer examination of the advantages and weaknesses of this approach.

The structure of this case study account will begin with a brief overview of selected literature of the growing area of online knowledge acquisition and debate. A substantive amount concerns itself with a descriptive account of the conference assessment, its setup, promotion and publishing, as well as providing examples from the conference to illustrate the learning that took place. Student use of social media and Web 2.0, prevalent so much in current education, played a significant part in the conference organisation. Though it is claimed many advantages of this learning experience exist, the paper will debate some weaknesses of this as an assessment instrument. It will conclude with some implications for practice as online education seeks to maximise knowledge acquisition.

METHODS AND STRATEGIES FOR ACQUIRING ONLINE KNOWLEDGE

At the core of acquiring knowledge is the ability of the student to give their views and comment on the views of others. Generally, students have become comfortable with a lack of face to face tutorials and classes that made up the majority of past education experiences. However, this almost "game" of physical presence has changed due to the spread of the internet. Although there are many arguments stating the qualities of face-to-face over computer-mediated communication in undertaking conferences [1] it is now becoming standard to debate issues online on blackboard or social media sites when doing subjects in a course. Wikis, Facebook, to a small extent Twitter, Blackboard but especially blogging software all make students Web 2.0 authors as they debate course issues. The problem that current exists in online educational history is giving solid evidence and research that Web 2.0 authoring can work as a major assessment instrument [2]. This paper aims to reflect on how this is possible by giving an account of an assessment of debating issues in this environment.

The potential of online debates to be successful can be enhanced by Web 2.0 software. One view is that online learning using the internet is driven by students wanting to explore a topic much like rather than experiencing a different way of

learning [3]. An online conference is one way that combines using technologies, in this case blogging software, with the ability to learn in depth not only about their area of interest but other topics in the conference streams. There is concern that blogging as a tool for learning may be more passive and discourage interactivity amongst students [4]. Nevertheless, as this paper will show, the blog by its technical nature alone can encourage interactions even though it is not asynchronous in nature. Topic exploration and debate by the act of posting alone on a blog is a learning medium that can produce mixed, but successful, results for student learning.

There are strategies that maximise the ability for students to learn from online interactions. Levine established strategies that maximise the ability to conduct successful online interactions in an electronic piece of assessment or a discussion. Table 5 summarises Levine's strategies [5]:

Table 1: Levine's Strategies for Effective Online Interactions in Electronic Media

Strategy Number	Levine's Strategy Advice for Instructors
1	Create a positive and supportive learning environment
2	Outline clear expectations for student conduct in the course
3	Support the students at all times
4	The student and instructor or lecturers are co-investigators
5	Implement activities which focus on higher order thinking
6	Establish many opportunities for participation
7	Contact and try to involve students who disappear from the discussions
8	Create discussion questions which promote application to real situations

Oliver and Harrington further argue that online teachers must be skilled and knowledgeable in strategies and processes that support online learners [6]. These are all important if students are to obtain knowledge from the online tasks given to them.

An assessment instrument such as a blog or discussion board must be a space where students collaborate in an open environment to share their ideas, reflect, and explore alternative perspectives [7]. This is challenging when online learners are faced with a multitude of offline commitments yet it is suggested the use of highly interactive tasks, such as the conference this paper discusses, are effective in acquiring knowledge about a topic. As English and Duncan-Howell suggested in their study of a business course Facebook group used for a student assessment, the potential for a student community of sharing is possible providing much support and encouragement by lecturers and tutors [8]. This paper will now explore this possibility.

THE NET 204/504 ONLINE ACADEMIC CONFERENCE

The next part of this paper is in two parts. First, a description of the conference assessment instrument and what took place in the setting up of, and interaction on, the conference site. The second part presents some examples of the conference and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. It should be noted that as at the time of writing the conference site is a public document accessible on the World Wide Web. Although full real names appear on the site and are accessible, only first names will be used in this paper. The conference site may be removed by Curtin University's Internet Studies Department in the future hence the conference site is reproduced to illustrate the case.

In order to present a descriptive paper that, while reflective, is grounded in facts, the collection of evidence to support the descriptions is based on Yin's Case Study methods [9]. The main data will come from the various websites and Web 2.0 platforms that, with the exception of one site, are still active at the time of writing. The main argument is that the conference was an assessment item but was run as a real-world academic conference from call to papers to closing speech. Therefore, to illustrate this, both website illustrations and quotes, all in the public domain of the World Wide Web will be shown.

The course, Net 204/504vInternet Communities and Social Networks, is offered online in the Department of Internet Studies within the School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts at Curtin University, Perth, Australia [10]. This course's aim was [11]:

The Internet offers many opportunities for people to share their lives with others and engage in social interaction and dialogue. Initially the Internet seemed to be about 'virtual' community; but these days, online and offline networking and community practices merge. The Internet now plays a major role in 'being together' - whether to maintain relations with friends and family, to advance political causes, to escape into fantasy worlds, or to strengthen communal belonging. In this unit, you will investigate the excitement, the skepticism, the possibilities and the pitfalls of communities, networks and online social interaction and become more effective in managing and facilitating them.

In order to achieve this, the lecturer decided to simulate an academic conference as an assessment instrument. It was conducted in the same way a formal conference is. Conference streams were decided by staff, students were to submit a paper that argued a point of view, receive it back with a draft mark and resubmit it for viewing and discussion amongst both students and outsiders including invited academics in the stream of internet and cyber studies. The main criteria were that the paper argued a thesis with supporting literature, which is somewhat different from a formal essay, the common assessment instrument used in the Internet Studies degree.

A main outcome of the assessment framework was to make an analysis of, and reflect on, the relationship between the internet user and the online groups to which they belong. That was the overarching outcome of the conference assessment. The criteria was for the student to take a position about a topic related to online communities, suggest a thesis to discuss and argue with evidence the validity of the thesis statement. Students were rated on the strength of their argument, the quality and amount of external supporting sources used and the grammar and structure of the writing. Marks were also allocated to the amount of participation the student made to defending their own papers and commenting on other students' papers. However, the quality of the student postings was taken into account; that is, it was expected that comments on papers would argue rationally but politely the strengths and weaknesses of papers or provide alternative points of view and opinions. This was the key to learning by doing this type of assessment; interchanging opinions but also providing extra knowledge to the student's paper on how it might be improved or to consider other research the student who wrote the paper may not have known.

The conference was divided into four main subject streams the student was able to pitch an idea to for a paper. However, another part of the assessment process was participation in the promotion of the conference. All students were encouraged to use Web 2.0 and other platforms and software to organise and promote the conference. After a slow start one student took the initiative and created a Ning social network site. This was a turning point because the features of Ning provided synchronous and asynchronous forms of dialogue as well as being a central repository of information far more useful than the course blackboard site. Having both forms of dialogue allowed collaboration, idea sharing and task allocation, which provides a way for the student to understand the nature of group co-operative work and organising conferences [12]. It should be noted that although students were being marked for their contribution, the lecturer and tutors had no control over forcing anyone to contribute. Nevertheless, once some students started using Ning a large number joined even if it was just for the online meetings that were held to decide the promotional strategies the conference was to use.

The promotion phase was where the most use of Web 2.0 and other internet technologies took place. There was no doubt that some students had abilities that were suited to more complex tasks. For example, three students in the design stream in the Internet Studies degree, distinct from the social studies stream, used their design skills to design a logo for the conference. One student had film and video editing experience and created a YouTube promotional video [13]. A poster was created for online display by other students. Students suggested using Facebook and Twitter as promotional devices which were adopted. Ning online meetings were used during the weeks leading up to the conference to discuss these ideas while students worked on their papers and submitted them to the lecturer and marking team. After it was suggested leading worldwide internet academics should be invited to read the papers and comment, the students set up a shared Google Docs spreadsheet to enter in academics and others they thought should be invited. Also one student was asked to create a set of rules and conference etiquette and post them on Ning and in Blackboard for comments. The different skills employed on different projects reflected the diversity of students coming to online learning to learn how to communicate and work in online environments. Although it is suggested that collaborative technologies may not guarantee students will work cohesively [14] overall the conference promotion activities were successful in bringing many of the students in the course to, at a minimum, contribute ideas and, in turn, gain knowledge on how a conference is organised.

The lecturer decided to host the online conference using blogging software similar to Word Press Blogging Software. This was due to the ease of posting comments on the site and easy to follow navigation in the template's design. The site was called Online Conference on Networks and Communities and had its own domain name, which would remain on the World Wide Web until 2012 [15]. Figure 1 shows the site's opening page:

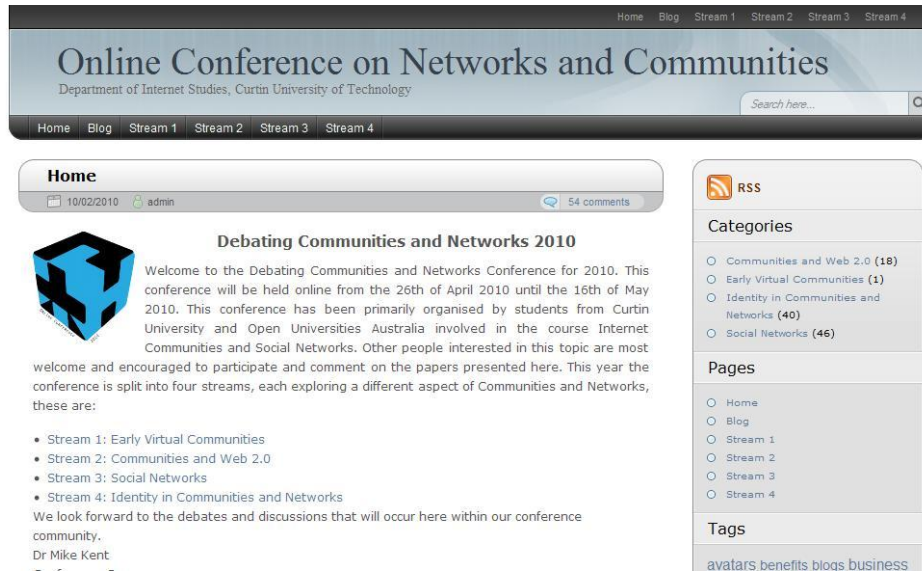


Figure 1: Net 204/504 Opening Conference Page

A formal opening and closing YouTube video was placed on this opening page with the logo and a written greeting. Site users could use RSS feeds to keep current with all postings. Tags and latest comments assisted in finding specific information and recent posts. Students had to register to use the site but could use their real names or a user name. The majority chose their real names. The papers were returned to students and they made corrections to them, and then uploaded the text and graphics to the site.

It was important to create subject streams that had the focus of communities and networks but could allow flexibility to explore a topic. Table 2 shows the streams, the stream's description and the number of papers:

Table 2: Conference Stream for Net 204/504

Stream	Stream Description	Number of Submitted Papers
Communities and Web 2.0	Concerned with the relationships between virtual communities and interactive Web 2.0 platforms	18
Early Virtual Communities	Issues to do with the early rise of virtual communities	1
Identity in Communities and Networks	Concerned with issues of individual and group identities and how they are presented and negotiated in communities and networks	40
Social Networks	Issues concerned with individual, group and business community behaviours in social networks and the way they are used by them	46

Within these streams students argued many issues including gaming, computer hacking, business use of social media and cyberbullying. However, reflecting the current academic interest at this time, Facebook issues were mainly discussed with pro supporting and counter arguments for this Web 2.0 platform. The assessment requirement was to read as many papers as possible and engage in a debate with the author. It was encouraged that papers were critical and supportive. The use of references to support arguments was also encouraged, but the quality of the argument was taken into account when marking. At the end of the conference the students were asked to self-rate their performance and contributions to the proceedings and justify why they thought they should earn the mark their conference participation.

AN EXAMPLE OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION EXCHANGE

In this section a case study example of an exchange of knowledge, which the student who wrote it has given permission to reproduce, is given to illustrate the workings of the conference assessment. Tessa choose to write in the Identity in Communities and Networks stream about the benefits of those living with disabilities using virtual communities. Her argument was stated clearly as [16]:

This paper will explore the ways in which active participation in online communities can foster an environment where a person with a disability is valued for their individual identity and intellect and not judged by their initial appearance.

Part of the physical layout of the online text of the paper is shown in Figure 2:

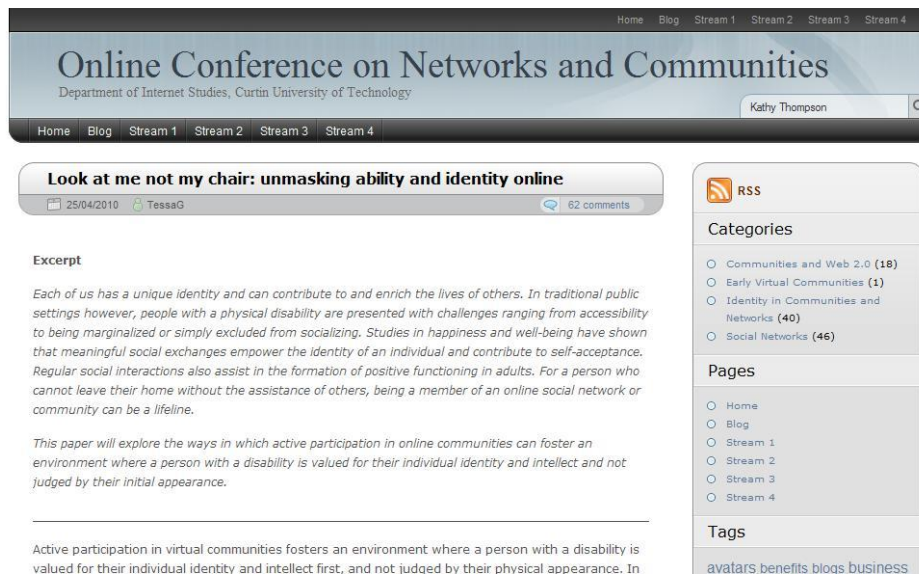


Figure 2: Tessa G Online Paper in Conference Site

The comments were posted below the essay. One example of an interaction that closely mirrored the requirements, namely to debate the argument but also bring in the respondent's paper was held between Tessa and another person. This extract shows how not only knowledge was obtained from both parties but also how both Tessa's argument and the others argument debated in a similar way to a face-to-face debate.

The respondent and paper author discuss their experiences of interacting with someone living with a disability and the way Web 2.0 technologies can assist them to interact. In this section an example of an interaction that fulfilled the criteria of gaining knowledge from both the author and the other student is analysed to show the ideal the lecturers and tutors were looking for. It serves as an example of ideal practice and a new way to exchange ideas and knowledge. The student read Tessa's paper and identified with the content, providing both a personal comment and reflected back to Tessa her own research she did for the conference:

I was interested in this paper on a few levels. Growing up, I became accustomed to some degree of the difficulties people with disabilities face as my grandfather was critically injured in a workplace accident and was confined to a wheelchair for over 50 years. Although I do not have a disability myself, I do have a chronic health condition so am particularly interested in how the internet facilitates health support and empowerment. For my paper, I put forward the view that Web 2.0 platforms, such as online support networks, blogs and social networking sites, facilitate online "communities of care" for people with health conditions. (please refer to my paper <http://networkconference.netstudies.org/2010/04/web-2-0-platforms-and-health-care-how-online-support-groups-blogs-and-social-networking-sites-are-facilitating-online-%E2%80%98communities-of-care%E2%80%99/> for more details! It is really interesting though to look at this situation from an identity perspective, and your paper has allowed me to do this.

Therefore, the student had learnt that Tessa's paper was somewhat different to hers and highlighted the difference between her approach to disability and the internet and Tessa's. However, she also acknowledges that by reading Tessa's paper she is looking at the issue differently. Further they debate the identity issue by bringing in a personal example:

One particular comment you made really struck a chord with me – "...if a person with a disability is isolated from society, the formation of their identity and in particular their social identity, will be troubled and unresolved." I have a close family member with a (non-physical) disability, who has been isolated from society, and it is so true, his social identity is definitely "troubled and unresolved", he has so much difficulty not just socialising, but coping with everyday events where he needs to interact with others, like shopping or going to the bank.

However, this is supported by a reference with the student informing Tessa about someone living with a disability having an experience in Second Life which helped with managing his disability:

Your quote about Winder, when discussing disability and identity, reminded me of a quote I read when doing a previous subject last year. A "Eureka Street" article profiled Niels Schuddeboom, a disabled person confined to a wheelchair. Niels used his Second Life avatar to do the sort of activities he couldn't do in "real life", such as walking. Niels discussed his Second Life experience:

"Perhaps the most profound difference I have experienced is that people have treated me differently" he said. "In real life, due to my wheelchair and lack of physical coordination, people often regard me as intellectually as well as physically disabled" (Cassidy, 2007).

I thought the last line of your conclusion, "For people with a disability who are already 'amputated' from society, virtual communities become 'extensions' that improve their quality of life and define their identity" really sums up your paper well. Congratulations on an excellent paper!

Therefore, she has engaged with Tessa, imparting both personal and academic knowledge and while she did not offer harsh criticism of the text like some participants in offline academic conferences do, still fulfilled the objective of an academic conference; to critically debate offered arguments.

As part of interacting Tessa replied engaging with the other student replying to her comments and briefly critiquing the student's paper, hence showing Tessa took the time to review the other student's paper. This was a requirement of the conference; to critically engage with other's arguments especially those that engaged with the student's paper first.

Thank you so much for your heartfelt comments – I appreciate the time you took to leave such a detailed response and am looking forward to finding the article written about Niels Schuddeboom.

This is a polite formal acknowledgement and it is an ideal to praise the other person who took the time to read the other's paper. Tessa then offers a viewpoint about physical disability and internet use:

It is sad but not uncommon to find that people with a physical disability are often treated as if they are intellectually incapable – you can imagine the damage that can occur to an individual's self-esteem and their sense of identity as a result of repeated interactions which reinforce a negative image.

Online, I have found that it is words more than images that leave a lasting impression.

Interestingly, Tessa brings to her response a criticism of current academic research on disability and the internet. She engages the reader offering agreement with the other's view. However, she also offers an appraisal of the student's technical writing style.

The majority of papers on this conference have researched the negative aspects or the deviant side of online communities.

It was therefore refreshing to read the positive impact of online communities which you presented in your paper.

I agree with your statement that 'online communities of care' offer more than information. They actually empower participants and assist them to accept their situation through personal posts and by responding to those of others...quite

similar to our situation on this online conference site. I have found that I have discovered more about the impact of online social networks and communities on this site than I would have if I had trawled through vast tomes of academic papers online or in a library.

I'm sure it is due to the participatory nature of this conference.

I read your paper yesterday and found it so well-written that I had to mull it over for a day and will head over there now to post a response – Congratulations

Your opening excerpt was fantastic in orienting the reader toward your ideas.

What this interaction shows is despite the synchronous nature of the engagement and lack of face-to-face, they have within the technical limitations of the software, discussed issues relevant to their argument. This shows how the nature of a conference has changed. While they were aware of the need to present certain information for assessment marks, being under pressure to present quality postings rather than just surface comments, this interaction was an example of what was possible to do in an online conference instrument. The main argument is that new knowledge can be gained by such an interaction and that the online conference approach can work providing all students understand the importance of providing quality, well researched and critical responses. These are expected in offline conferences so this case study example shows it is possible to achieve this goal.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE CONFERENCES

Based on this case study and on the experience of interacting in this online conference environment, some critical assessment of this learning instrument is presented. This is done by examining the advantages and disadvantages of this approach from the experience of this conference. As an assessment instrument the overall feeling was that it was a positive experience for the students by the feedback the lecturers and tutors received both on the conference site and through the course evaluation. Despite the site being a temporary space it still did allow, as Turkle [17] suggests, a space where the student was not only the author of the content but constructed themselves as competent writers in their area of interest. Certainly the diversity of topics and approaches was the conference's greatest strength. Much knowledge was gained from taking the time to read the various arguments and approaches to virtual and network community issues. It allowed students to consider issues beyond their own choices, something that in a physical space such as an offline conference may not be possible due to not being able to attend any session.

The disadvantages of this approach did not lie in the quality of argument and presentation of papers but in the participation levels of the individual. The students were encouraged but not forced to contribute and it was not a requirement to read every paper on the site. Not all participated and in some cases posted the paper but never responded to the comments of others. Engagement in this instrument to gain knowledge is crucial because this platform provides an opportunity to impart knowledge about one's arguments and become confident by reading peer-supported comments in developing high level analytical writing skills. Some students did not see this as important and having it as the major assessment piece with no tasks in between to do may have encouraged the attitude to just leave their paper on the site and not engage. It could also be argued that a minor disadvantage was that aside from two papers, the level of critical engagement was lower than an offline conference. The majority of postings were polite and although netiquette played a role in controlling what was written, the students did not overall criticise the writing style, argument, data or conclusions. Therefore, how to improve the arguments was not seen as a priority by the students perhaps because of the fear to offend someone's writing.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This case study suggests that the 'game' of teaching and learning has been greatly changed by the new rules such an autonomous assessment instrument a student online conference presents. The conclusion is that it is possible for students to engage with each other in such a way to acquire new knowledge about their field of study but also be open to new knowledge about the myriad of topics and approaches others have towards constructing an argument about their interests. The technology is there to support this but obviously the student must know the boundaries of the task and what they are required to present for marks. However, in this case, the organisation of the conference by using the various Web 2.0 interactive platforms helped greatly in showing that online collaboration brings to the student the skills of others and shows the potential skills they could gain from looking at others' skills. To conclude that this assessment instrument is useful for gaining technical, social and analytical skills on different levels and of different types that broaden the student experience of gaining knowledge about their studied topic.

The main implication is that more research is needed to see how this method changes the way teaching and learning is practiced in online assessments. For example, some questions include should it be set more clearly to those who have never done an academic conference before what such an environment is like to participate in? What should be the boundaries of criticism given to student papers considering that some may have never undertaken such a task as writing a paper for critique by peers? In particular, the most important implication is how do lecturers manage the lack of interaction by some students? Obviously the need for gaining marks to pass or excel in the course play a part. How to encourage students to own and defend their work and to learn from peer comments mostly from other students may be somewhat daunting to those who are used to the lecturer or tutor feedback system. Nevertheless, the changed relationship between the person imparting knowledge, in this case other students, and who receives the knowledge is worth pursuing because in the future it will be more common that the student is the one that teaches the other student knowledge. As an assessment instrument the online conference, as demonstrated in this case study, has the potential to fulfill this role.

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