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Fostering Participation in Electronic Forums

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OVERVIEW

This case study describes attempts to foster students' participation in electronic forums. Different methods were used to foster this participation. These methods varied from putting rules regarding students' participation in electronic forums to extensive participation of the teacher in the different forums through other policies regarding participation in electronic forums. I highlight how these methods influenced the participation of students and discuss what other factors may have influenced this participation.

This case study relates to the "Great Designs for assessment" theme.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE CLASS, MODULE OR PROGRAMME

This case study describes attempts to foster participation of students in electronic forums that were part of online mathematics education classes. Students in these classes were preservice teachers in their second and fourth years and who specialized in mathematics and computers or in early childhood. I will talk about four classes: two from the mathematics and computers specialization and two from the early childhood specialization, two classes of second year students and two of fourth year students, where in every specialization we have second year and fourth year students. The number of students in the mathematics specialization classes was 24 in the second year class and 36 in the fourth year class, while the number of students in the early childhood specialization classes was 32 in the second year class and 48 in the fourth year class. All the classes were online classes in one teachers' seminar in Israel. Though I report what happened in four classes, I consider this article as describing one case study because the strategies used to increase the participation of students in electronic forums were the same at the four classes and the results of these strategies on the students participation were similar as well.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

- At the beginning of each one of the four courses reported here I did the following:

- I informed the students how their participation in the forums would be graded: 6 points out of ten would be given for their first post which consists of their answer on one or more questions that I asked regarding an issue in mathematics education, 2 points out of 10 would be given for feedback posts that they write to comment on the first post of at least three students and 2 points out of ten would be given for their answers on the feedback posts. If their participation in the forum is far more substantial than required but serious then they would get bonus on this participation. If their forums' grade passes one hundred then the points exceeding one hundred will be passed to their other assignments' grade.

- I informed the students that they should post their answer or opinion in the forum not late than the middle of the time period dedicated for the forum, give comments in the couple of days after that and reply to comments in the rest of the time given for the forum. I told the students that if they didn't abide by these participation dates then their grades would be lessened to 75% of the original grade.

- I told the students that I evaluate their posts by following these posts on a regular base.

- I showed the students another way in which I evaluate their posts in the forum: putting their email in a 'search' field to receive all their posts. This showed them that I wasn't satisfied with knowing just the number of their posts but the quality of them too.

- I opened two forums in every online course: one forum for social talk and one forum for questions, inviting the students to feel at home with the social talk forum and to participate in the questions forum by answering questions posted there without waiting for the teacher to do so.

- I resorted to these two forums at least once a day to see if the students posted anything, answering the questions posted in the questions forum, and commenting, when possible, on the texts posted in the social forum. This would encourage students to ask questions on one hand and feel comfortable with the course environment on the other hand. I continued visiting the questions forum at least once a week, but lessened my visiting to the social forum to once in two or three days, after two weeks from the beginning of the semester. I toldl the students from the beginning of the semester that I wouldn't come so frequently to the social forum as at the beginning of the semester.

- I started the assignments of every online course with a forum assignment, in which we discussed a mathematics education issue, for example the use of computers to teach mathematics to K2 pupils. I wrote feedback on every answer that the students gave for this issue. The aim of most of my feedback remarks was to make the students reflect on their answers or self-correct them.

- If a student suggests discussing an issue which is related to the course's themes I opened a special forum for this issue, making the participation in this forum not obligatory, but here too giving bonus to those who participated in the forum seriously.

- At the end of the course I asked the students to write their opinions about the course in a forum. The participation in this forum is similar to the participation in any other forum; i.e. the students write first their opinion about the course, and then discuss these opinions between each other. I too participate in the discussion, commenting on each of the students' opinions.

- Most of the students participated at least as required, not violating the time requirement of the forum. Few of them couldn't abide by the rules saying that they don't have internet at home which obliged them to participate only when they came to the college between the lectures.

- Various issues were raised at the social forum and various texts were posted there. Some of these issues were: congratulations, the future of teaching and the students' frustration from the many assignments they have. Some of the texts were poems, short stories and puzzles.

RATIONALE IN TERMS OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS

In their recommendations for program planning, Frey and Alman (2003) advise to incorporate multiple forms of feedback into the online course by using specific and consistent feedback, grading assignments with specific stated criteria, and providing general and specific feedback. I incorporated these principles to make the assessment procedure as clear and transparent as possible. This I did at the very beginning of the course, so that the students know what they are expected to do, how they are expected to participate and how they will be assessed for what they do. I did this to regulate the participation of the students in the electronic forums from the beginning. The participation rules, especially the participation time line, were intended to lessen the delay of the first

post or the comments on the first post, so that the interaction wouldn't be decreased in any stage of the forum's time period.

The REAP assessment principles (2007) advise to deliver feedback that helps students self-correct and which provides opportunities for feedback dialogue. Most of the teacher's feedback was to help the students self correct their answers or promote their reflection on these answers, while the goal of the clear rules of participation in the forum was to provide opportunities for feedback dialogue which actually happened.

The existence of the social forum would lessen the anxiety of the students who take online courses for the first time and help them feel that they have company at the new learning environment. It also answers the needs of students who are used to online learning because it provides a social environment which every student needs. The questions forum provides a help desk which students may recur to when they have a problem related to the subject matter that they study or a technical problem that prevents them from utilizing the online environment. Students who have problems and don't know whom to approach for help would get frustrated, which may affect their motivation to learn.

The purpose of my participation in the social forum as one of the students was to make the students feel comfortable even more than in the face-to-face environment. Feeling comfortable will make them more motivated to learn and participate in the forums discussions. The purpose of my answering the questions of the students in the questions forum, in few hours after they posted them, was to solve the problems of the students so their anxiety would be lessened and they would be able to continue their learning.

The purpose of starting the online course with a forum's discussion in which I comment on every student's first post was to show the students an example of an 'active' participation in the forum and to tell them that commenting at three students isn't so hard to do. This would impress the students and motivate them to write more posts in the forum.

Giving the students opportunity to suggest topics for discussion in the forum gives power to the learner, which probably results in active learners.

Giving bonus for participating seriously in the forum in a way which is far more substantial than required would encourage the students to participate more in the discussions, keeping an academic level in their posts. I can say that the bonus strategy, in this reported case study, led to serious participation of some students which may have affected the participation of most of the students.

Giving the students an opportunity to express their opinions about the course and discuss these opinions would make them reflect on many aspects of the online course, including the teacher's role, their roles, and the assessment of their learning. This also would give the teacher an implication of his teaching strategies, so he could refine these strategies in his future online courses.

The following principles would further enrich the learning and assessment practice in the electronic forum:
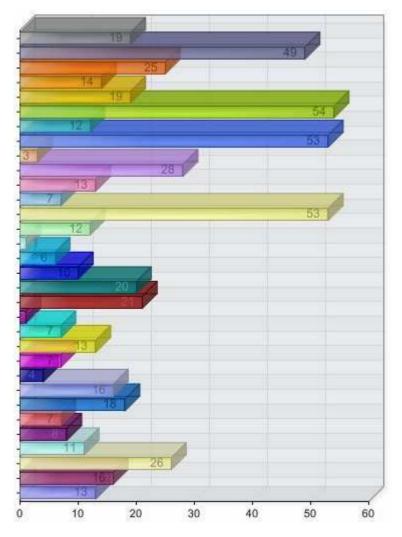- Almost half of the forum's grade should be given for the feedback and comments given by the students to each other. In this case I gave 40% of the grade to this part of the participation. Giving less would lessen the interaction of the students after they post their first post.

- Teachers should participate in the social forum and not leave it for the students only. This would make the students make more different topics in the forum, not satisfied with just congratulations.

- Bonus strategy should be part of the grade on the forum assignment, as well as the possibility of passing the points which exceed 100 from the forums' grade to the other assignments' grade.

EVALUATION

Most of the students in the four courses participated as required. Few students participated less than required and some students participated more than required. Figure 1 describes the number of messages each student, in the second year early childhood class, wrote in one of the forums. This is almost the same in the other reported classes.

Figure 1: Number of message posted by each student in an electronic forum - the second year early childhood class (N=32)

We see from the previous figure that some students wrote twenty or more messages in the forum, which is far more than the mean number of messages posted by a student in the described class (10.41 messages). It could be that what motivated these students is the bonus strategy, with the aim to pass some points from the forums' grade to the other assignments' grade. The bonus strategy benefited the situation and may have led to the required participation of most of the students in the forums. What may have led to the required participation as well is the precise partition of the time period of the forum between the three stages of participation: the first post, the feedback and the answers to the feedback. It seems that these two factors were enablers of change and critical in influencing the participation of the students in the forum discussion.

Almost all the students didn't write trivial comments, like 'Thanks for the post' or 'Your post is great'. One reason for not doing so is the transparency in which the teacher assessed the posts, showing the students, from the beginning, how their participation in the forum will be assessed.

REFERENCES

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