Distance education and the use of on-line discussion forums in education for librarianship

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Abstract

The use of on-line discussion forums to encourage active participation from distance education students has become a feature of many courses delivered in this mode. At Charles Sturt University, both undergraduate and postgraduate course in librarianship use on-line forums to engage students further in the learning process. This paper analyses the role of the forum in six librarianship subjects, finding that generally, a minority of students use the forum in any meaningful way and that there is little difference between undergraduate or postgraduate participation. Overall, students supported the idea of the forum even if though they may not have used it a great deal. Lecturers had mixed views over the usefulness of the forum and associated activities, finding that it added substantially to workloads while at the same time not fulfilling its promise of creating the virtual classroom. Suggested approaches for improving the nature of forum participation were suggested.

Introduction

With the advent of email and the web, with its possibilities of delivering distance education materials online, there has been a rapid move in the provision of distance learning from a reliance on purely print product to generally, a hybrid position, where a mix of both print and online approaches are being used. Mills, Eyre and Harvey (2005, p44) describe this evolution at Charles Sturt University (CSU) in Australia, where distance education programs are now either fully online or offered as a combination of print and online materials.

In many countries, this move to online has coincided with more fundamental changes in higher education policy with the introduction of fees, the move towards life long education and the growth in numbers of mature age, working students. In addition, this period has also seen an attitudinal change, described by Tait and Mills (2003, p1) as a move from the student as passive receiver to an adult playing an equal role to faculty in their own educational development. Hanlula and Pawlowicz (2004, p153) talk about this transformation of roles, facilitated by the new technologies, where students are given high levels of autonomy and independence, sharing information and supporting each other, with teachers acting as guides and coaches. They go on to note that this increased autonomy and responsibility calls for an increase in critical thinking and analysis abilities in students, in order to properly assess contributions from peers and elsewhere, given these have not gone through the normal academic process of review and evaluation.

Thus the use of asynchronous discussion forums, listservs or bulletin boards has in recent years become a popular means for engaging distance education students in creating the 'online classroom', (note that throughout this paper, online refers to the

use of ICT to access materials, listservs and forums and does not imply real time interactivity or discussion). This has allowed the establishment of structures that should enable and encourage this information sharing, peer support and opportunities for analysis and reflection. Burnett et al (2003, p40) report that in a study comparing the level and nature of class interaction in a face-to-face subject with that of an online subject, students studying online asked more questions and that these tended to be more substantive than those asked in class. However, there has been limited research in this area and the literature on the success or otherwise of online discussion encouraging increased interaction suggests that while discussion forums have been widely adopted they are seen as still in their infancy, with strategies, processes and procedures evolving as experience in what works and what does not accumulates. McFann (2004, p280) in a recent project examining faculty views on the usefulness of listservs noted that while virtually all staff saw these as a potentially powerful and potent tool, most academics felt they had fallen short of expectations.

This somewhat ambivalent view of the benefits of online discussion forums is widely held by teaching staff (Ellison describes it as technology getting ahead of instructional design (2005, p36)) and accurately describes the view held by myself and a number of my colleagues at Charles Sturt University (CSU). Despite this, Mills, Eyre and Harvey (2005, p44) note that at CSU there are online discussion forums available for all distance courses with students strongly encouraged to make use of them. Given this promotion of online discussion forums within CSU and more widely throughout the tertiary education sector, together with the reported and anecdotal evidence that suggests varying levels of success, it was decided to conduct a detailed analysis of a number of discussion forums used by undergraduate and postgraduate library and information studies (LIS) students at CSU during the 2005 academic year in order to try and identify what actually comprises a 'successful' forum and the factors involved.

Background

Charles Sturt University is an experienced provider of distance education in many fields. It has offered library and information studies (LIS) programs in this mode since the 1970s to local (Australian) students and to a growing number based overseas in countries such as Hong Kong and Mauritius. Enrolments in undergraduate and postgraduate programs total around 1400. The mode of delivery has evolved over time to the point where the usual package today comprises print material, online readings and web references, an online discussion forum mediated by the lecturer and, for some subjects, a CDRom with additional material. Usually there is no face-to-face component. The online discussion forum and the interactive dialogue it aims to develop has been described by Mills, Eyre and Harvey (2005, p44) as a 'key to effective learning' and is a feature of all LIS subjects with potential students advised that a prerequisite to enrolling in the course is access to the Internet and familiarity with the basics of online interaction. For most local students this now poses few problems with rural and remote users gaining access via satellite and upgraded telecommunications systems. For some overseas students however, there are still issues of easy availability, line speeds and confidence in the use of the Web.

Methodology

For the academic year 2005, a total of six forums were studied. Four of these were for postgraduate LIS subjects, two for undergraduate. Total enrolments in each of these subjects varied from 20 to 98. Each subject had only one related forum. The forums all followed the same format with students accessing them via their University log in, separate from their normal email inbox. Students could post directly to the forum and respond to any other student's posting. There was no facility for private responses or for anonymous postings or for a synchronous chat room approach. The majority of students (75%+) are mature aged and have experience of working within the library or similar environment. Very few, six or less per class, were from outside Australia.

Four of the subjects had a compulsory assessable (in all cases worth 10%) assignment piece with the answer to be placed online. This assessment piece was posted to a separate sub-forum and has not been considered in any of the discussions below. Five of the six subjects had 'discussion points' built into the printed study guide which urged students to respond with their thoughts, experiences etc to the online forum – although this participation was not assessable with none of the subjects giving a mark for forum participation alone.

The total number of postings on each subject forum was tallied and postings linked to students and their final results. A level of content analysis was undertaken on all of the forum postings. Thus a posting was placed into one of four categories as detailed below. This was a fairly subjective measure and no effort was made to differentiate postings of substance to those of the "me too" type. If a posting related to an issue under discussion it went into that category regardless of the depth of its content. Postings from the lecturer responsible for the forum were counted and analysed separately into different categories.

The categories comprised:

- Greetings, introductions. Thus the initial introductory messages containing personal information, comments and social discussions. Examples were straight forward personal data, offers of help and assistance with locating material, calls to form local study groups to chatty comments on the course.

- Directional postings. From the lecturer or the University relating to issues such as library access, lodgement of assignments, how to withdraw etc.

- Discussion. This was the category of substance which included postings from students on the coursework, responses to discussion points called for in the printed study guide and related issues raised by their reading. Some of the postings in this category were quite in-depth, others more cursory, but all had some relationship with the subject.

- Assessment. Any questions or concerns about the various assignment tasks and/or the marks received.

For the lecturers' postings, only two categories were used:
- Responses. Basic replies to student postings and general introduction.

- Stimulus. Postings aimed at encouraging discussion, directing students to additional resources and promoting activity on the forum.

Finally, a short survey (see Appendix A) was distributed to the teaching staff in the School of Information Studies seeking their views on the advantages and disadvantages of using the online forums.

Results

The raw numbers and percentages (in brackets) of student forum activity and the categories of posting are shown for each of the subjects A-F in Table 1, while lecturers' responses on each subject forum are quantified in Table 2. Posting activity relative to the final grade awarded a student was correlated as in Table 3 (the mean number of postings per student was calculated against the total of that grade awarded for the subject and is shown in the columns; note that the Failed/Withdrew column also includes students who enrolled but never undertook any of the work).

The figures in all three tables apply to the entire class, including any overseas students. The numbers of overseas students included were generally quite small, the maximum number being six out of a total of 81 enrolled in subject D. Due to the small numbers involved, it was felt that little in the way of meaningful information could be gathered regarding the use of forums by overseas students and thus they have not been differentiated in any of the analysis, but included in the total student cohort. However, this is a factor that has been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Mills, Eyre and Harvey, 2005) and it does appear there may be differences in the use and approach by overseas students to online forums. It is an area that requires further investigation.

In addition to this basic information on forum activity, an informal survey was conducted among the six LIS staff involved in managing the forums. The survey questionnaire is shown at Appendix A. This survey aimed to gather anecdotal information as to how individual lecturers view forum use, the amount of time they commit to it and the advantages and disadvantages they feel accrue for both students and staff. This was a simplified version based upon a more detailed survey instrument used by McFann (2004) in a study of US educators and their use of online forums.

Finally, as part of their evaluation for all subjects, students were asked about the usefulness of the online forums to their study. The responses received (typically from 30-50% of those enrolled) have also been evaluated relative to these six subjects.

Table 1 – Student activity by subject

Subject	Class size	Total no. class posts	No. of class posts (%)	Max no. posts from one student	Mean no. all stud's	Posting categories raw numbers (percentages)			
						Hiya	Direct	Disc'n	Assign
A. Mgt (PG)	68	196	38 (57)	25	2.9	49 (26.3)	12 (6.5)	61 (32.8)	64 (34.4)
B. Mgt (UG)	20	62	13 (65)	19	3.0	7 (11.3)	8 (12.9)	19 (30.6)	28 (45.2)
C. Colln Mgt (UG)	98	379	61 (62)	23	3.9	41 (10.8)	17 (4.5)	261 (68.9)	60 (15.8)
D. Colln Mgt (PG)	81	346	59 (73)	20	4.3	1 (0.3)	15 (4.3)	295 (85.3)	35 (10.1)
E. IT (UG)	92	327	52 (57)	22	3.6	25 (7.6)	21 (6.4)	81 (24.8)	200 (61.2)
F. IT (PG)	30	118	25 (83)	17	3.9	19 (16.1)	11 (9.3)	40 (33.9)	48 (40.7)

Table 2 – Lecturers' responses

Subject	Total no. lecturers' posts (% of all postings)	Response raw nos. (%)	Stimulus raw nos. (%)
A. Mgt (PG)	63 (25)	56 (88.9)	7 (11.1)
B. Mgt (UG)	45 (42)	33 (73.3)	12 (26.7)
C. Colln Mgt (UG)	152 (29)	126 (82.9)	26 (17.1)
D. Colln Mgt (PG)	194 (36)	156 (80.4)	38 (19.6)
E. IT (UG)	98 (23)	80 (81.6)	18 (18.4)
F. IT (PG)	50 (30)	37 (74.0)	13 (26.0)

Table 3 – Student activity relative to final grade

Subject	Pass	Credit	Distinction	High Distinction	Fail or Withdrawal
A. Mgt (PG)	1.1	3.2	4.2	N/A	1.0
B. Mgt (UG)	1.0	2.0	7.8	N/A	0
C. Colln Mgt (UG)	1.8	4.5	5.2	5.6	1.1
D. Colln Mgt (PG)	1.0	4.7	5.2	8.5	1.6
E. IT (UG)	2.6	3.6	3.9	8.0	1.4
F. IT (PG)	3.6	1.8	3.5	5.0	3.6

Discussion

The figures suggest there is little difference between the posting activity and the nature of the discussions of undergraduate or postgraduate students. Overall, for all postgraduate students, the mean number of postings per student was 3.52; for undergraduates 3.75. This does not show a high level of activity and interaction by the vast majority of students and indicates that for most, forum activity is a very tangential part of their overall learning experience. The percentage of students posting anything at all ranged from 57% (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to a high of 83% for postgraduate, 62% for undergraduate, suggesting that postgraduate students may be less shy about entering a forum and making at least one comment. With the small number of courses studied, this finding is indicative only.

These results show that anywhere between 20 and 45% of students take no active part at all with their subject forum, despite entreaties in both their written material and in online discussions that this forms an important part of their learning process. They may be 'lurking' in the background reading, but not commenting, and the relatively low level of 'greetings' type postings suggests that for many students, just identifying themselves online is something they do not wish to do. Whether this is a problem or not is debatable with Carey and Gregory (2003, p287) noting that the distance education literature is equivocal over the link between levels of student achievement and levels of interaction. However, what it does point to is that one of the main aims of the forum, promoting discussion in a collegiate like environment is, generally, not being attained.

The level of anonymity afforded by subject forums for students who have no face-to-face classes at all has been thought to provide a supportive environment for the quieter, less confident students that may mean they contribute more through this approach than in a traditional classroom tutorial (McFann for instance reports this as one of the benefits cited by the academics she surveyed (2005, p270)). However, this

needs to be looked at further and may prove to be chimerical – the quiet ones in class remain quiet in the online environment. While there may be many other reasons why students do not actively participate in the online discussions – limited access to the technology is an obvious one – gaining a clearer understanding as to the reluctance of many to get involved may help in the design of forums and improve interaction rates.

From the student feedback received for these subjects, opinion is generally positive towards the role of the forum overall. Thus for the 26 students who completed an evaluation for subject D, the postgraduate collection management topic, 23 either agreed, strongly agreed or very strongly agreed that the forum helped in their learning. Two disagreed and one very strongly disagreed. Free text comments generally supported this positive view although feedback ranged from "the forum was a valuable learning and motivational tool" to "forum chaotic". This feedback balance followed similar lines for all of the subjects. Other student comments, taken directly from the forums, also show the range of attitudes that students bring to this side of their studies. Thus a student described his/her view "Personally, I'm not too keen on this forum thing and the idea of forum postings as tutorial, it always seems like a whole bunch of people talking and not saying very much and no one really listens to anyone else anyway". This posting provoked a number of more positive responses where other students offered up suggestions and practical strategies for getting the most from the forum, thus providing valuable feedback to the instructor as well as to the student themselves.

One clear finding, common to many of the subjects, is a major concern regarding assignments and related assessment requirements. For the two IT subjects in particular, between 40 and 60% of all forum activity related to assignments. For the management subjects as well, a high degree of forum traffic referred to the assessment. For both management and IT, major components of the assessment required of students related to case studies where they were asked to apply their learning to a fictional case study supposed to reflect a 'real world' situation. It is likely such a form of assessment always raises more discussion and query than more straightforward assignment tasks. This is reflected by the relatively low level of concern (illustrated by low levels of forum discussion) on the assessment for the collection management subjects where the assignments do not include case studies and require what may be considered more straight forward academic research and evaluation.

While the use of the case study approach may be part of the answer, these findings also suggest that there is a need to revisit the assessment requirements for the management and IT subjects in order to clarify the tasks required of students. If the assignments are well articulated in the printed study guide received by students and fit comfortably with the subject coursework, there is less likely to be such a high level of concern and thus forum traffic, regarding what is required.

If one of the aims of the online forum is to create a virtual classroom where a broader understanding of the topic and related areas can be gained through open discussion, then the level of student interaction related to such discussion is important in assessing how successful the forum is in achieving this aim. For the six subject forums under review, this level of discussion varied considerably. Posting activity classified as "Discussion" comprised anything between 24 and 85% of total student

activity. In four of the six subjects, queries regarding assignments outnumbered discussion postings. Again, there appears to be no difference between undergraduate and postgraduate responses and no link between the level of stimulus provided by the lecturer and the level of discussion response. Thus the two subjects with the highest percentage of lecturer "Stimulus" postings (B and E – management and IT) had a low percentage of discussion postings relative to the total (both just over 30%). Subjects C and D, the undergraduate and postgraduate collection management subjects had very high levels of discussion postings, possibly reflecting student's greater ease with the subject and willingness to put their own experience and understanding up for public comment. The printed study guide that accompanies these subjects also exhorts students to post to the forum with each of the 17 sections having a clearly identified "forum posting topic" asking students a direct question with response to be posted online. This compares with the printed study guide for subjects B and E where there are also exercises calling on students to consider a particular situation but only two occasions in subject B and none in E where there are direct instructions for students to post their considerations to the forum. It would appear that a clearly identified task, spelt out in the print study guide, is a more effective way of promoting thoughtful participation on the forum than online promotion by the lecturer. But again, the general low level of participation in active discussion is disappointing given the clear and expressed expectation by staff that this will benefit students in their learning process.

Table 3 was created by sorting students by their final grades, noting the number of postings (of any sort) each made and then averaging these out for each grade. For some subjects the total student enrolment was relatively small and thus the numbers within each grade even smaller, which made the resultant means of interest but not in any way significant. For others, the numbers involved were reasonable (although still too small to make effective use of significance testing) but sufficient to be indicative of any trends. This was the case, with overall, a clear trend that suggested those receiving higher grades had been more active on the online forum for their subject than had those with bare passes. While there will be many variables contributing to a student's participation in the forums and in achieving their final grades, this indication of a possible connection between the two is one that supports the belief that active participation on the forum has a positive impact on learning outcomes. However, Carey and Gregory make the valid point that even if higher levels of active participation appear to be linked to higher achievement it is difficult to draw any conclusions from this given the variable nature and often low level of student interaction (2003, p287). This is an area for further investigation.

The load taken on by the lecturer in maintaining the forum is illustrated in Table 2 where the level of activity in responding to student queries and responses or promoting discussion is evident. Lecturer's contributions ranged from 25% to 42% of the total activity with the vast majority of these being responses to student queries or concerns. Their role in stimulating discussion was a smaller one, ranging from 11% to 26% of their total activity. This level of activity and subsequent time commitment is a concern for the lecturers involved. The survey conducted amongst a number of the LIS teaching staff at CSU reported that the time estimated for forum involvement each day during semester ranged from 20 minutes to up to two hours. This time commitment and the pressures that it inevitably brings have been reported elsewhere

as one of the issues to be addressed as more teaching moves to a substantially online mode (Smith 2004, p27; McFann 2004, p272).

All lecturers considered that one of the strengths of the forum was in providing the ability to disseminate information and clarify issues. They noted the relative efficiency of using forums in this way to target all students. This view has also been reported in other surveys where academics reported they "overwhelmingly used the listserv as a means of communication…and a means of disseminating information" (McFann 2004, p268). Some lecturers felt the forums did help generate a sense of community amongst students, with opportunities to 'value add' to the learning experience and foster broader discussions which would otherwise not occur. They also noted the potential for building social networks and helping students overcome the feelings caused by isolation, distance etc. Again, McFann (2004, p269) reports similar findings but notes that "most of the instructors interviewed did not feel as successful with the level of discussion as they would like".

Disadvantages of the online discussion forums were seen as its very nature – providing feedback in anything other than a much abbreviated form was just too time consuming and did not substitute for verbal feedback. There were concerns over the potential of students to mislead others and also for disgruntled students to air grievances in public without first discussing the issue with their lecturer. Clear guidelines on the purpose of the forums and how they should be used were strongly supported. The time and effort needed to make the forum successful were also noted as an issue that was not fully recognized in assessing workloads. This complements McFann's findings where many of her respondents reported time pressures as the major disadvantage of working with listservs (2004, p272).

Interestingly, there was a strong divergence of opinion amongst lecturers on the usefulness or otherwise of designing an assessment piece that required students to post their responses online (and to comment on other student's postings). Traditionally, at CSU, some subjects have required this although at a very low level – usually worth only 10% of the total subject assessment. Comments ranged from "useless, useless, useless …" through concerns over the academics use of the forum for this purpose to "… a valuable exercise". Obviously this is an area that requires further consideration and debate within the School.

Overall, academics were happy with the use of forums for information dissemination; concerned over the time and effort required to maintain an effective forum; unsure as to their success or otherwise in developing debate and building reflective communities of students and split over the usefulness of online assessment activities.

Outcomes

The use of some form of asynchronous online discussion forum has grown rapidly in many distance education programs. For the LIS program offered by Charles Sturt University, virtually all subjects have had such a forum since 2000. Yet the literature is ambivalent about their relative usefulness given the significant investment in time and effort required to establish and maintain each subject forum.

This small study looked at activity on six subject forums in use during 2005 and considered the attitudes of staff and students to the effectiveness of the forums. The findings and possible actions can be broken into broad themes:

Student use of the forum
- The majority of students actively participate in the forum but in a minor way.
- Postgraduate students show a slightly higher level of active participation.
- Despite this modest use, student feedback is strongly supportive of the presence of forums and their usefulness.
- Promoting broader discussion as a form of 'virtual classroom' is more difficult. Placing a clear request to "post your comments on the forum" in the printed study guide seems to be more effective than online exhortations.

These findings suggest that the forums do play a useful role, even if they have not reached the goal of building the level of dialogue, reflection, vigorous debate and student engagement in the educational outcomes that has been considered possible. Students generally like them with, just as in the class situation, some eager contributors but many quieter ones. Engaging a larger percentage of the non-engagers needs to be a goal for staff consciously trying to develop the forum to something beyond a simple notice board. One approach would be to use the printed study guides or other media distributed to students in hard copy to clearly emphasise the role of the online forum, what is expected of students, provide examples of online discussions and positive quotes from student feedback. It should be very clearly stated where students are expected to post comments to the forum. This needs to be kept at a practical level, say three or four times in a subject and possibly divided so that half the students are asked to respond to the first two, half to the second batch. Even if only partially successful this would create a significant level of forum traffic. In an example from the CSU LIS course, an existing subject contains 37 places in its printed study guide where students are called upon to post their comments to the forum. With a regular enrolment exceeding 100, this would quickly become impractical even if only a fraction of students respond. Better to focus on a very small number of instances and try to get a high percentage of students involved.

Assessment tasks
- For most subjects, questions and concerns regarding the assessment tasks constitutes a majority of the traffic on the forums.
- Online assessment pieces requiring the posting of a commentary to the forum were not seen as useful by the majority of staff.
- Across all subjects there was a trend for students with higher levels of forum participation (of any kind) to end up with higher overall grades.

If the assessment tasks can be expressed as clearly as possible it should reduce the percentage of online discussion devoted to queries and concerns re assignments. This may then leave more time for debate and discussion around the subject as a whole, rather than focusing on the assessment. This is supported by the finding that in the collection management subjects, C and D, the level of concern over assessment resulted in 35-60 queries (10-15% of forum traffic), with up to 295 postings (85% of the total) relating to the broader topic discussion. This compares to the IT subjects, E and F, where concern over the assessment tasks was very high (40-60% of forum

traffic) resulting in smaller numbers and percentages of the total postings relating to the broader discussion.

Lecturers' uncertainty regarding the usefulness or otherwise of online assessment pieces needs further investigation, particularly of students views on the value of this, in order to determine an appropriate approach.

The possible link between overall grade and forum participation can at best only be suggestive. The large numbers of variables involved such as brighter students naturally using the forum more; or the impact of one or two major users and the relatively small class sizes for most subjects skewing figures, make these findings problematic. However, a clear trend was evident for five of the six subjects. This could prove a useful finding to publicise to students as evidence of forum participation being one of the variables having a very practical impact upon learning outcomes and student attainment.

Lecturer concerns
- All lecturers felt the forums were very good vehicles for disseminating information.
- There were mixed views as to the forum's usefulness in building a virtual classroom.
- The role of the lecturer in responding to queries and other postings was time consuming and constituted a significant percentage of all forum activity. The lower level of lecturer activity relative to promoting discussion or debate appeared to have limited impact in most subjects.
- Lecturers expressed concern over potential or actual misuse of the forum by students.

Lecturers see the forum as a primary method for getting information out to students. This needs to be made very clear to all those enrolled in a subject so that, even if a student avoids active participation, they regularly check and read forum postings (hopefully more than just the lecturers'). Again, an emphasis can be placed on the usefulness of the forum for clarifying assessment tasks – a major area of concern for all students.

Developing the forum into a lively online classroom appears to have had limited success. It may be that a live, chat room approach, scheduled for a specific time and promoted as the equivalent of a classroom tutorial, would be more successful. The nature of online communication means that detailed and complex postings take significant time and effort to create. Both lecturers and students face time pressures so that creating detailed forum postings or responding in detail to another's postings, especially if there are a number of views being expressed and opinions voiced, requires a significant effort. In addition threads get discontinued or overridden by a new strand starting or by new concerns arising as assignment times draw near. It may be that specific topic, live chat rooms or webcasts, held regularly with attendance being compulsory, is a better way of establishing a true learning environment with high levels of student involvement and debate. Programmed in as part of the course work, students (and lecturers) may see this approach as another exercise or requirement rather than a voluntary extra imposition which will only be addressed if there are a spare few minutes. An alternative approach may be to design group

assessment tasks where sub forums are established for designated subsets of students who are required to develop, through online discussion, a response to a case study or other assessment task. Grading would be based on the level of interaction, the breadth of discussion and individual input.

The amount of time and effort put into maintaining forums needs to be properly acknowledged by faculty administrators. The forum should not be seen as just an added extra but aim to be an integral part of any student's experience of their online learning. To achieve this takes time, effort and appraisal as to what works, what does not. Lecturer's involvement in this needs to be acknowledged and resourced with development and training provided to ensure that course forums across a discipline have a level of consistency and approach. Students should expect each subject forum to run in a similar fashion and place equivalent demands on their time and abilities to maintain debate and discussion at an appropriate level. With growing experience and familiarity with the forums, students may be encouraged to more actively participate as they become aware of the requirements and expectations that are common to all the subject forums with which they are involved.

With a consistent approach to forum design and use, students should fully understand the role of the forum and appropriate forum behaviours. If these are reinforced in a similar manner for each subject, there may be less likelihood of students behaving in an inappropriate manner. Again, consistency of approach across lecturers in their identifying what constitutes inappropriate forum behaviour and their reaction to it is an important factor in reducing such behaviours and making it clear to students what will result from their actions.

Conclusion

It has been commonly acknowledged that asynchronous online communication provides a limited form of communication, lacking the richness of face-to-face discussion, which makes it a poor medium for the delivery of complex messages (Clyde & Klobas 2000, p274). Yet for most distance education students, it has become an integral component of their learning package with participants reporting that they strongly valued the online interaction with staff and other students (Frey et al. 2004, p90). This strong student support for online interaction was confirmed by the findings of this study where the majority of students reported high levels of satisfaction with the functioning of the online forums. This contrasts to the views of lecturing staff who generally feel that online forums have been a mixed blessing, with a lack of debate and student involvement, other than in matters of process. This has been reported elsewhere with "very few learners taking the advantage of this opportunity by contributing to discussions" (O'Rourke 2003, p149).

Given the positive view of most students it would seem that the online discussion forum for distance education subjects is an important factor in student's overall satisfaction with their course. It is therefore worth the effort to try and improve the role and functioning of the forum so that it comes closer to the vision of academic staff of a virtual classroom as well as meeting student needs. This requires a modest amount of effort to move the forums away from being an 'optional extra' to becoming integrated into the educational strategy. Improvements related to consistency of approach, promotion to students, realistic expectations on participation and the place

of synchronous chat rooms as virtual tutorials would all help develop the forum into an integrated pedagogical model that provides the best possible course delivery to distance education students. Achieving this will then help ensure that the changing nature of the instructor/student relationship noted in the Introduction, and the benefits anticipated arising from this change, will actually occur.

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Appendix A

Management of student forums

The aim of this brief survey is to gather data regarding your experience of using online forums in the teaching of LIS subjects at CSU. No comments will be attributed to individuals.

1. What year did you first start using online discussion forums?

2. Do you have an online forum for **all** subjects you teach?

3. Give an approximate time in minutes (e.g. 30 mins) for the average time you spend per work day on a forum during term time?

4. Note what you feel are the advantages of using forums.

5. Note what you see as disadvantages.

6. Comment on the usefulness or otherwise of forcing students to use the forum through having set assessment pieces requiring them to respond online.

7. Has the online forum changed your approach to teaching the subject?

The author

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