Virtual Seminar Courses: Issues from here to there

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Abstract:

This article is a brief examination of some of the benefits and concerns of virtual conference seminar courses within higher education. Virtual conference seminars take place entirely on-line as discussion forums, through the extended use of e-mail or bulletin board forums. Student participation is asynchronous. Discussions are prompted and facilitated by the course instructor, after students have engaged in readings. Benefits from this mode of course delivery include more in-depth discussion and networking of participants. Time, adequate resources and access, as well as training and support are key issues for administrators. Ongoing research agendas need to address concerns about learner involvement as well as gender participation and discursive styles of facilitators and students.

What was first the privileged provenance of military defense networks and university researchers has blossomed into a robust Internet system accessed by millions. Higher education early recognized the potential opportunities for expanding the boundaries of discourse communities. It was a gradual evolution from these communities to virtual classrooms that meet in the text and graphic environment on the Internet. The use of computer mediated conferencing coursework such as virtual conference seminars has been steadily increasing according to Wells (1992). This new instructional technology impacts faculty, students, and administrators. Northern Arizona University has been using distance education for years. Recently, virtual conference formats have been added as part of their extensive IITV offerings as well as stand-alone virtual conference seminar courses. Many of the points noted in this article have been gained through the author's experience of teaching and facilitating virtual conference seminars with graduate students.

Demands and concerns:

What is required to make a virtual conference seminar course work? There are basic hardware and software needs that must be met. The first concern is that the hardware must be able to support the software and grant access to many users. Secondly, the software must accommodate the needs of instructors and students by providing ease of access and flexibility of use. The content of the course work must be matched with the technology. The virtual conference format can easily meet the needs of a graduate level seminar course where the focus is on discussing and analyzing current research and trends. However, an undergraduate course in teaching mathematics, using manipulatives, may not be as well suited to this approach.

Time is also a concern when using a virtual conference seminar method of course delivery. It takes time to train faculty and students to use the virtual seminar format. Course materials are all assembled for access before the course begins. Time and effort are required to ensure that students have access to these materials as they progress through the course. There are also issues involving the amount of time an instructor is available to the students taking this course. To provide timely feedback, instructors must be actively involved with the virtual seminar several

times a day. Setting e-mail office hours is one way instructors can communicate feedback to their students on a regular schedule.

Time is also an issue with access to on-campus computer labs for students. Not everyone has Internet access at home, therefore labs must be available for these students to use. Especially during the first week of the course, trained technicians as well as course instructors should be available in the labs to assist students in getting started. Scheduled time in a computer lab, for the whole class, will cut down on a lot of confusion later. Those students who are participating from distant locations need a clearly written step-by-step guide to help them participate in the virtual seminar.

There are increased demands on faculty to understand the dynamics of discourse and to respond to the differences among the learners in the course. As facilitators of a seminar discussion, faculty must learn to identify text discussion styles that discourage or marginalize discussion by others. Some discursive styles are inclusive and invite participation while others are more dominant in tone and discourage others from responding (Herring, 1996). When one or more student participants use an authoritative tone in the discussions, those students who have a more inclusive or attenuated style of discourse may feel put off or put down. These dynamics affect participation in the discussions. Faculty need to learn to recognize these styles and dynamics to provide equal opportunities for participation by all students.

New skills to continually motivate on-line students need to be developed. After an initial excitement in an on-line course, a lull may occur. The instructor needs to recognize this and know that some social discourse is important to the development of community on-line (McDonald and Campbell Gibson, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Developing a sense of community is vital for the course participants to feel a responsibility and ownership of the discussion within the seminar.

There is a risk factor involved in this type of learning, especially the verbal processing required in a virtual seminar. The text is public. Participants must develop trust within the group to engage in transformative explorations of their own beliefs and knowledge. In addition, instructors must help students to pick out the important threads of conversations while not inhibiting discourse (Hiemstra, 1998). Students also need to learn nettiquette issues and to understand that more than two screens full of information t a posting is probably more than can be assimilated within a conversation. These are discourse issues that virtual seminar instructors need to teach in order to set up a conducive culture for a community of learners.

There is an increased student responsibility for learning within this environment. McGonigle and Eggers (1998) note stages that students, as well as faculty work through during a virtual course. Students often require help from instructors, technicians, or other students to move from confused or frustrated stages. There is often a lack of technical skills for most first time users. Instructors need to provide appropriate time for initial tasks along with availability of technical help (Hiemstra, 1998). Students often report inability to log onto the server during high use times. Access becomes a serious issue for conference participation. Adequate hardware, lines, and storage space ease these difficulties.

Participation in on-line discussions varies in quantitative and qualitative ways. Faculty need to help students to respond to others and encourage regular participation. Listing course expectations, participation requirements, and protocals as part of the log-in screen helps keep students on track. Technophobia still exists for faculty and students. Lack of keyboarding skills as well as lack of familiarity with what the technology can provide are some of the reasons given

by participants for minimal participation. Others reasons for low participation might include the habits or comfort levels. Utilizing a virtual conference environment also changes the teacher-centered learning environment to one that is more student-centered as participants become active in the discussion forums.

Benefits:

The nature of asynchronous communication via a conferencing software system enables all participants to contribute to the discussion. Turn-taking and bids for the floor are not the concerns that they are in physical classrooms. Students who often feel that they don't get the chance to participate in classroom discussions now have every opportunity to do so.

Discussion contributions tend to be more thoughtful as students become aware of the presence of audience. Students take advantage of the opportunity to edit their own textual discourse before submitting it to the conference. Students tell their stories of experience and often cite references in support of their illustrations of practice. Other students respond and link their stories. In this way, a vast resource of knowledge becomes constructed in print. Discussions are oral texts; they are in written form but read like oral discussions (Davis and Brewer, 1997). This characteristic of the medium leaves a written record to which others may students to refer. Instructors, facilitators, and administrators have the opportunity to use these texts of discussion for research.

Students must verbally process information within a virtual seminar course. They must participate with an original posting and with responses to other student postings. Students must process and re-process information. This provides opportunity for a deeper understanding of the material as they think about and discuss an issue with other conference participants. This type of forum increases interaction with the course content and students gain a sense of ownership of their knowledge.

Time is an important component of the virtual conference environment. Students have unanimously appreciated the opportunity to participate in the conference at their own convenience, without the confinement of a set classroom time or place. Due to this flexibility, there has recently been an increase in the numbers of "non-traditional" students enrolling in course work. These students often have families and work/job related responsibilities that can be accomodated by virtual conference course work. Also, students and faculty both appreciate the quick response time and feedback enabled by the system.

Student groupings within a course can easily be changed. Students can participate in a whole group conference, in smaller group discussion or cooperative work groups. Separate work journals can also be maintained so that multiple levels of interaction can be simultaneously provided. A social component is an important part of any course, including a virtual conference seminar course (McDonald and Campbell Gibson, 1998). There are interpersonal and group dynamics that are affected by the types of interactions mediated by the conference.

Students are also able to interact with those who may be physically challenged as well as other students who may live in different geographical regions and very different communities. The different perspectives and life experiences brought by each member of the conference adds to the broadened outlook gained by the course participants through the discourse. Students learn how to network with each other. Especially at graduate levels, these can be professionals from the same disciplines who have not had this opportunity before. This networking can continue after the

class session is over through the use of e-mail and real time chat software. In-service teachers often voice feelings of isolation due to the demands on their time. Asynchronous networking for these professionals enables conversations and collegiality to develop across time and space.

Conclusion:

Administrative concerns often center on time and access. Time is not saved by virtual seminar courses. Instead, the experience is time intensive for both faculty and students. Technical training and support are also key factors in the success of virtual seminar conference courses. Neither faculty nor students function well in frustrating situations. Support must be provided for faculty in putting together easy-to-follow quality course materials. Hardware, software and technical resources must be adequate to the demand.

New technologies are being used to create new learning communities. Learning theories, group dynamics and discourse analysis need to be used to examine the resulting text dialogs to maximize learning potentials for all participants. Net usage has been overwhelmingly male but this is not necessarily true of our virtual seminar courses. How do we safeguard that our female students will feel welcome in this environment? Transcripts of classes record the interactions. It is important that faculty and administrators take note of the dynamics and where they lead.

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