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fOUnDIt? Sharing online resources to support subject communities

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ABSTRACT

This article reports an interview and questionnaire survey investigating students' participation in subject communities via fOUnDIt, a tool for sharing links to online resources. Harking back to Tim Berners-Lee's vision of the role of the Web as "a tool for furthering serious research communications between scientific researchers" [1] this research investigates how students might use the Web to share online resources and support each other in an online subject community. The views of group of Level 1 Technology students were gathered on their use of fOUnDIt as part of integral course activities, focusing on their thoughts on whether the facility supported them as part of a community, and if they would continue using the facility. These issues regarding how students use such a facility and their views on identity and community are explored, followed by recommendations for further research.

Key words: e-learning, web-based resources, subject communities, social context, assessment, information literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Investigations into students' use of online resources have indicated that when the resources are presented as optional, their uptake is very limited [2]. In contrast, however "wherever links to on-line resources were included as an integral part of course activities (e.g., for specified activities, for project work or for critical analysis of primary sources) they were much more highly used by students." [3] This project explores this theory in the context of Level 1 Technology students at the UK Open University (UKOU) using a website, fOUnDIt, to share links to such online resources with fellow students in a subject community. Through a series of interviews with and observations of students, some of the key issues relating to students' use of fOUnDIt are identified. Following on from the work of Atkins [4] at the UKOU on why and how we might build stronger communities around academic subjects for students to join and to identify with, this report aims to investigate a facility that might be used to support these communities. Atkins' work aims to "create subject-focused websites for students" with "the ultimate aim [...] to deliver an electronic 'home' for students which seems relevant to them, is dynamic and increases their sense of belonging to a community of learners" [3]. Investigating means of supporting this effort, this report examines students' views on their experience of becoming part of a subject community which has the potential to exist beyond the duration of their course (normally 6-9 months).

In distance and online education, where students and tutors do not regularly meet face to face, a facility to bookmark and share

links to online resources appears to be a useful means of supporting the subject community. The provision of fOUnDIt as a website which allows users to collect and rate online resources is an attempt to address this. Through a series of course activities, students were directed to share links to relevant online resources with others on their course. The site also provides the facility for users to comment and vote on others' submissions. Aimed at providing technology which can act as the "conduit for discourse among participants" and as the "medium of engagement that binds the community together" [5], it is anticipated that fOUnDIt can be used to elicit best practice in terms of supporting subject communities online.

2. METHODOLOGY

Enquiries into the use of fOUnDIt were carried out on a level 1 Technology course in the UKOU. The key areas under examination related to students' views on their experience of using fOUnDIt. The questions asked aimed to investigate if students found the tool useful, if they felt that it supported them in becoming part of a community and if they would be motivated to continue using the tool beyond the requirements of their course assessment.

After a brief introduction to fOUnDIt early in the course, students were given an activity as part of an assignment. This involved students voting on their preferred online resource from a set of three recommended by the Course Team and then some extended activities to encourage students to share useful links with each other. This approach of integrating the use of online resources with an assessed part of the course seems to be more successful in encouraging students to actually read the resources, indeed Kirkwood [6] suggests that "most adult independent learners ... are likely to avoid looking at resources that are recommended in coursework but are not obviously related to assessment".

Following the students' participation in the activity, a small group of students were interviewed via telephone and online instant chat and then the full year group invited to complete an online questionnaire surveying their experience of using fOUnDIt.

3. RESULTS

The results of this study take the form of number of observations made from the feedback received from the survey of students.

Students stick to their own group

As had been anticipated, students tended to regard their subject category as the limit of what they would read. They felt part of

the community for their subject and were not inclined to read or submit resources to other categories. This lends weight to the argument that the

Tags used are very specific

The means by which students label the resources they submit highlight some interesting points. Students tend to use very specific labels, or tags, to identify a resource, for example, relating to the particular section in the course material (e.g. block2pt3) which will be meaningful to the others in the community, but most likely meaningless to anyone outside it. This raises interesting issues about identity and boundaries and confirms that some level of community is assumed by the participants.

Students browse and lurk

Many students have stated that they are more likely to read others' submissions than to submit links themselves. While this maintains the readership of the postings, it is clear that if all students only 'lurk' and no one participates, the community itself cannot be sustained. This has implications for course developers who may need to allocate key people to regularly submit links at quiet times in order to keep students' interest and maintain positive perceptions about the facility.

Useful for project work

Students working in smaller groups to share resources have indicated that they would find fOundit useful for future group work. Anecdotal evidence with a research group of UKOU staff investigating online tools supports this view. Whilst this evidence is intuitive rather than empirical, it does suggest that a facility or repository for sharing links to online resources is a useful means of supporting the subject community.

Further research would be useful to establish firm ground rules for supporting subject communities beyond the duration of a course through online course activities during the course.

7. CONCLUSION

This article presents some of the key findings of a survey on students' use of an online facility to support their subject community. The findings indicate that students are motivated to continue using such a facility as part of a community, or group, when they have a particular goal to work towards. This supports Kirkwood's [5] view that students' use of online resources is closely related to assessment requirements. However, there are some indications that a facility that allows students to share (and store) links to online resources does have longevity beyond the limit of the assessment period. Further investigations into the use of such a facility should be undertaken in order to establish the extent of this.

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