ONLINE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (CoP) AS A COLLECTIVIST LEARNING TOOL FOR A CULTURALLY DIVERSE POSTGRADUATE STUDENT GROUP

Charmaine Ryan
University of Southern Queensland
West Street, Toowoomba, Queensland -4350s

Vijaya Gururajan
University of Southern Queensland
West Street, Toowoomba, Queensland -4350

ABSTRACT

Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals that many overseas students were enrolled in Australian Tertiary education in 2004, indicating 8.6% increase in overseas students from 2003. While higher education institutions, typically universities, are increasingly reliant on fee paying students, academics are struggling to meet the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student group. Many students' educational experience involved teaching and learning method and assessment expectations considerably different to that expected at Australian universities, especially at the post-graduate level. This, in turn, requires a different approach to teaching and learning to assist them to be able to succeed in what is a new and foreign educational environment. This study reports the use of an online Community of Practice (CoP) and group assessment to both support Asian students' transition from one educational system to another as well as continuing to meet the needs of western educated students. Results to date are very encouraging.

1. INTRODUCTION

Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that 228,555 overseas students were studying in Australia in 2004. (http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/statistics/documents/08_overseas_s tudents_2004_xls.htm, accessed on 31st May 2005) with 105,696 students studying Management and Commerce. At this university the increase in international student enrolments has highlighted that our current teaching and assessment methods may not be meeting the educational needs of these students. In many courses there has been a substantial increase in the rate of academic misconduct, particularly in the area of plagiarism, and in requests for assignment extensions and deferred examinations. While the change has occurred across the whole student body, it has been identified as a particular problem among international students of Asian educational background. The University and the Faculty have implemented many intervention strategies to assist students to understand what is expected of students in our educational system. Strategies include face to face presentations and self help sessions about 'how to avoid plagiarism' (St Hill 2004), time management strategies, and stress management skills. To date these attempts have had limited success.

Many students demonstrate shyness when contributing their own ideas to discussions (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). The reluctance seems to emerge from issues such as poor English, an inability to effect independent learning initiatives, failure to participate in group learning activity, or previous educational culture that valued the use of an expert's words (Quinn & Ritter. 2003). The later issue exposes such students to a high risk of plagiarism. Some students lack an understanding of what constitutes plagiarism,

believing that using a friend's work is not plagiarism providing permission is obtained before use (Gururajan & Roberts 2005). Sheard and Dick (2003) found that in their study, 13% of all students admitted to copying entire papers, 33% of whom had copied from a website, book, or resubmission. The avoidance of failure, improved results, difficulty with the work (Sheard & Dick 2003), and a heavy workload (Gururajan & Roberts 2005) were reasons students gave for such behaviour.

Studies indicate that as a group Asian students can be successful studying western educational methods (Bechervaise, 1996; Biggs, 1999, cited in Hellsten and Prescott, 2004, p. 345), particularly where extra tutorial assistance is given (Beasley and Pearson, cited in Bretag, 2004, p. 532), students are given the motivation and time to adjust (Kember, 2000), or have student centred tutorials (Wong, 2004). Asian students find courses focused on career preparation motivating particularly if it takes a collective approach rather than an individualistic and competitive one (Kember 2000). Kennedy (2002) suggests factors such as language proficiency, teachers' expectations, and familiarity with the assessment style used may contribute. Sheard and Dick (2003) suggest that time management and overt student engagement in learning may reduce plagiarism.

Plagiarism became a particular problem in a postgraduate Knowledge Management course in 2004 with 239 enrolled students. The problematic assessment was a case study assignment that required students to research current knowledge management practice and using the concepts learned in the course apply it to the case study. This assessment method had been used since 2001. The problem was highlighted when there was a substantial increase in requests for assignment extensions. 36% of all students requested an assignment extension of which 30% were international students studying at an on shore partner campus (Group A) and 6% were students, international and domestic, studying on campus or externally (Group B). A further 21%, 15% from Group A and 6% from Group B, neither submitted an assignment nor asked for an extension. During marking 34 instances of alleged plagiarism were identified, 28 from Group A and 6 from Group B. It was time to consider a different type of assessment and trial of a collectivist form of learning and assessment was conducted to answer the question:

Will an assessment method using a collectivist student centred approach to the development of group responses to a series of case studies reduce the incidence of plagiarism in a culturally diverse student group?

2. THE STUDY

A qualitative approach with action research as an instrument to collect information, iterate and move to the next cycle of action was used. The study established an action plan the semester, implemented it, and then evaluated the process through students' and lecturer's feedback. The outcome informed the development of the plan for the next semester's offering. The cyclical process of action research is well supported (Coghlan & Brannick 2005). According to Coghlan and Brannick (2005) action research helps the group through a series of unfolding cyclic or iterative actions which are conducted in order to improve and provide change to their own actions which are considered to be experiential and reflection practice.

This approach was considered appropriate due to the nature of the Knowledge Management course which encourages concepts such as tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge encompasses socially constructed meanings and information. It actively embraces knowledge such as perception, beliefs, intuition, judgment, thumb rules, skills, ability to infer from other's statements, visual cues etc. Much of these are either perceived from lecturer's understanding, students provide their feedback through their experience, and they express their concern or understanding in various ways which may or may not be recorded but explicated through telephone conversation, through emails or as passing comments.

Action research allows these concepts to assist in the iteration or cyclical processes to compare, improve and effect the change the study desires. Hence this study actively embraced action research theory and reports the findings of the affect of this iterative process for the students.

Students in this study were enrolled in a postgraduate Knowledge Management course and were studying in a variety of modes including on-campus, external, or via an institutional partner sited within or outside Australian. The student group consisted of two major cultural groups, Asian students, primarily from India, and Australian. The Asian students typically studied externally with the opportunity of face to face instruction at a partner campus and the Australian students were studying in external mode. All students receive hard copy study materials supplemented by an online discussion list.

Given the growing body of research that supported a collectivist approach, the course assessment was changed from individual to predominately group assessment. To establish a collectivist approach to learning each student was allocated to a study group and each group was allocated its own online communication space. Groups were encouraged to approach their learning experience as Knowledge Management in action and to develop their group as a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP has been defined as a social network of actively involved individuals sharing a common set of values and knowledge (Wenger et al, 2002), is well suited to learning (Brown & Duguid, 2000), and involves implicit and explicit knowledge that can be disseminated to all participants whether they are central to the participation or on the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Modern CoPs communicate in many ways including physical face to face, by videoconference, teleconference, email, electronic chat groups and discussion groups.

A pilot study was conducted in 2004 with 29 students, mainly Asian students. The purpose of this study was to identify potential assessment activities that encouraged critical thinking and to overcome issues associated with plagiarism, time management and lack of motivation as previously discussed. This pilot study gathered experiential data as well as data collected through students' feedback. The students were allocated to a group and encouraged to use the CoP electronic communication space to discuss particular aspects of the curriculum, to exchange ideas, develop new insights into the concepts, and to solve any group dynamic problems or problems of understanding. An emphasis was placed on highlighting referencing standards and how to avoid plagiarism. Results were very encouraging with only two incidents of plagiarism. Other feedback led to refinements in this study's design.

The 2005 study was conducted using a group of 89 postgraduate students. 72 enrolled through an on shore partner and 17 directly. Students were given four case studies that they were required to discuss in their group's online communication space and develop a discussion which they posted to a public communication space for assessment and for other students to critique. In addition to their group contribution all students were required to submit at least two individual critiques in response to the group postings and to critique the course, submitting it privately to the course's electronic drop box.

Students studying on campus or externally through the partner campus had a lecturer, who delivered lectures to the students. These students also had tutorial assistance. Tutor assistance was given to all groups, face-to-face or electronically, to encourage students to maintain CoP interaction. All lecture slides were available electronically and the home campus lecturer was available to all students via the general discussion list and email.

Students were divided into a group of five or six students. Students belonging to each group were requested to select a leader who laid basic rules for interaction amongst members and had the responsibility of making sure that the group members worked together effectively to achieve the groups goals.

Each case study provided students with two weeks time duration to promote discussion within their CoP and develop the group's submission. The electronic discussions within individual groups were private to that group.

2.1 Results

All but one group posted their first contribution on time with the last group posting the following day. While there was some initial disquiet within some groups about slowness of contributions most students' contributions were acceptable. Fifteen groups were reduced to twelve as some students dropped out of the course and students reallocated. As the CoP interactions developed students became more comfortable contributing and negotiating those contributions. Some Australian students were dismayed at the constancy of the contribution as they had developed a block approach to other courses scheduling in study around work and family responsibilities.

Content of the postings, individual and group, suggested that the strategy encouraged critical thinking. Some postings revealed that for some students English expression was a challenge. However despite this students had the confidence to use their own word to express their current level of knowledge. Most surprisingly there was only one incident of 'failure to cite', no incidents of major plagiarism, and one incident of collusion involving two students.

The collusion incident involved a breach of group security as one group's scribe obtained an early copy of another group's posting and posted it rather than collating the contributions made to the group by the other group members. The incident was discovered when the other group recognized their early work and reported

the incident. Other members of the 'offending' group appeared to be ignorant of the 'theft' and their discussion within their communication space demonstrated their original contributions to the discussion. How the student gained access to the other group's work was not discovered. Overall the responses between members within the CoPs' communication space were found to be friendly and expressing gestures that were very important for net etiquette.

Using this form of assignment the incidence of plagiarism was reduced considerably. In the pilot study in semester 3, 2004 it was reduced to a single incident and in semester 2, 2005 there were no occurrences. The case study style assignments appear to have had a considerable influence in reducing the incidence of plagiarism over the two semesters. The improvement was particularly evident for international students studying on shore with a partner, figure 1. However there was also a reduction in the other group comprising of on campus and external students, figure 2.
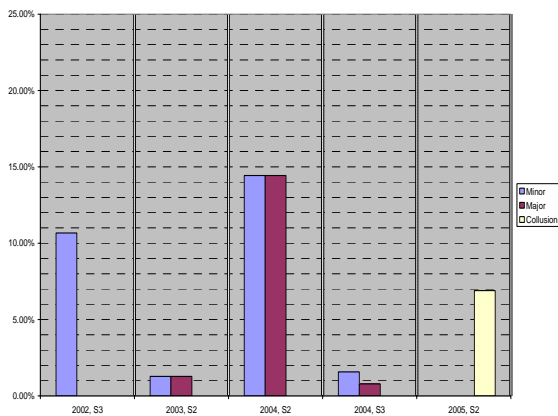

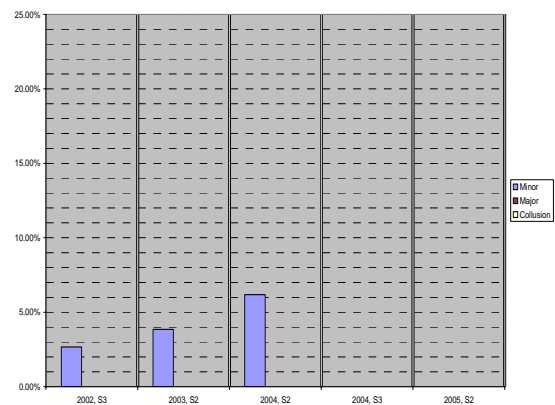Figure 1. International students - on shore partner

Figure 2. Other students

All groups posted their contribution for each submission date bar two. The seventh posting was missed by two groups. There were a one or more late submissions for most postings. One group demonstrated on two occasions some difficulty as for two subsequent postings it was eleven days and twenty-eight days late. Other late postings ranged from one to four days, Table 1. Survey comments from students indicated that they felt some considerable peer obligation to the group in meeting contribution deadlines.

Table 1. Group submission times

Posting	# Submitted	# Late	# Days Late
1	15	0	
2	14	1	1
3	13	1	1
4	12	2	1,11
5	12	1	28
6	12	4	1,3,3,4
7	10	0	
8	12	1	1

3. CONCLUSION

Overall the results show that for this culturally diverse student group that combining a CoP learning group approach to the development of group postings to set case studies was successful in reducing the incidence of plagiarism. Interestingly the incidence was reduced in both major groups.

Many students found the participation in their CoP a positive and enjoyable activity. Whether student feedback supported the suggestion that the group activities simulated the development and conduct of a CoP may be debatable. Some groups appear to have had a dedicated focus on a particular outcome rather than on

the development and sharing of knowledge that would lead to that outcome. It could be suggested that such an approach could contravene the concept of a CoP as a social network of individuals with a common set of values and knowledge (Wenger et al, 2002). However even in these groups it would appear that some exchange of knowledge occurred between the individual and the community via their social interactions such that students with more knowledge shared their expertise with other group members. Sharing extended to knowledge not directly included in the curriculum such as help given to students with their English expression.

Time management did not appear to be an issue as most groups submitted all their postings by the due date. With the exception of one group, where a group required extra time to post their contribution they did so within a few days of the due date. Again this was a considerable reduction in the number of extension requests experienced in previous semesters.

The collectivist approach appeared to benefit all students as they indicated they enjoyed the group learning and were generous with their feedback about what worked for them and what improvements they thought could be made to improve the process. Many experienced the process as challenging but informative. One challenge identified was for mature age working students who found the regular postings did not allow them to plan their study workload around their work and family responsibilities. A less frequent posting schedule was suggested. Analysis of feedback is continuing and will be used to inform updates to the assessment in future offerings of the course.

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