

Paper

Theme: [E-learning](#) — meeting the challenge of technology on society through new partnerships

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Using a Lecturer's Personal Web Site to Enhance the Social Interchange among Students in an Academic Course

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Key Words: Collaborative Learning, Higher Education, ICT (information and communication technologies), Social Issues, Virtual University

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Abstract

Developments in web-based communication technology have opened up new ways for students at a distance to communicate with their teachers and with each other. The literature covers three types of web-based interactions: *learner-content interaction*, *learner-instructor interaction*, and *learner-learner interaction* (Moore 1989, Tribe 1994). However, the purpose of this study was to examine a newer aspect in these relationships. The aim was to investigate the social impact of a lecturer's personal web site (www.passig.com) on the personal interchange with his students.

The participants were 63 students taking the author's one graduate course at the University. The students were given learning assignments, which required social interaction to complete, using a variety of Peer-to-Peer technologies.

The results show that most of the students found the lecturer personal web site as an efficient P2P (Peer-To-Peer) tool that enhances social interchange outside the walls of the class, and 85.7% of the students recommended that it is important to add personal aspects as being delivered only on a personal web site into academic courses.

Key words: Collaborative Learning, Higher Education, ICT (information and communication technologies), Social Issues, Virtual University

Introduction

Developments in electronic communication have opened up new ways for students at a distance to communicate with their teacher and with each other.

One can find three types of interactions in the literature (Moore 1989, Tribe 1994):

1. *Learner-content interaction*
It is this process of intellectually interacting with the content that results in changes in the learner's understanding, that is, learning.
2. *Learner-instructor interaction*
The instructor can stimulate or maintain the student's interest, organize the learning experience, present information, assess and provide information on progress, and provide counsel, support and encouragement. On-line tutoring range from comments on the return of an assignment, to posing questions to guide reading and research, to leading discussions on a topic.
3. *Learner-learner interaction*
Between one learner and other learners is how students consolidate their ideas, test hypotheses, and confirm opinions and attitudes. Research into peer interactive learning demonstrates that students who work cooperatively achieve superior results to those working in individualistic or competitive ways. The practice of students giving

and receiving advice and assistance from one another particularly shows a positive relation to achievement

To achieve these kinds of learning there are a variety of learning strategies that can be employed. Kibby (1999) lists a handful of such strategies, which can include:

- *Panel discussion*—a group of 'experts' begin a discussion on a set topic, students join in at any point, and the experts play a diminishing role as the discussion progresses;
- *Brainstorming*— setting forth of ideas without evaluation;
- *Problem solving exercise*—small groups working out a solution to a problem;
- *Teamwork games*—adapted from small group 'bonding' exercises;
- *Role playing*—such as MUDs and MOOs that are forums based on role playing;
- *Simulation*—MOOs can also provide settings for simulations;
- *Co-tutoring*—students are assigned topics which they then 'teach' another student;
- *Case analysis*—independent study of a case followed by group analysis;
- *Collaborative writing*—group writing, or individual writing followed by mutual critiques;
- *Expert in electronic 'residence'*—an expert is available to make presentations, be interviewed, and lead discussions;
- *Interview*—questions can be asked of the instructor, designated student or other resource person, followed by discussion;
- *Debate*—the pros and cons of a particular issue are argued by a team, and then the audience allocates their support for one opinion;
- *Student reports*—individuals post a report on which others then comment;
- *Discussion of set reading*—threaded discussions with comments on each required reading.

A variety of studies have been conducted to test the effectiveness of these strategies on social aspects of the learning processes. For example, Powers & Mitchell (1997) examined one graduate course, which was offered entirely over the Internet. From the analysis of student performance and perceptions in this particular class, it is apparent that even as virtual classrooms become more prolific, the classroom community of learners can continue to flourish.

Another study (Kaye 1998) investigated uses and gratifications of the web and its social impact. The study identified six web use motivations: *entertainment, social interaction, passing of time, escape, information, and web site preference*.

A study of the attitudes of 29 graduate students enrolled in their first web-based class indicated a high degree of student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction as well as accompanying high levels of satisfaction (Westbrook 1999).

One study examined a graduate distance course for elementary-school teachers using a "class web page" to increase teacher-student and peer interaction. Periodic student surveys during the course showed the dramatic impacts of the class page on student interaction behaviors, technology use and literacy, and attitudes toward technology (Thompson, Malm, Malone, Nay, Oliver and Saunders, 1998).

However, our study addressed a different aspect of social interchange that occurs not following a course designed on the net. It investigated the effects that a lecturer's personal web site can have on the relationships and online social community that can emerge from and follows a conventional academic course.

As more and more instructors are building personal web sites and using them as teaching tools and as vehicles to achieving a variety of teaching purposes, this study aimed at investigating the social role such a personal web site can take in enhancing the social links among the instructors' students following the usual social interchange taking place in the classroom in an academic course.

To the best of our knowledge, up to the writing of this paper, no study was conducted that aimed to research the influence of an instructor's personal web site is having on the student's social interactions outside the walls of the classroom.

Participants

The participants were 63 students taking one of the author's graduate courses at the University. During the academic school year, the students were given assignments over the instructor's site (www.passig.com) using a variety of Peer-to-Peer technologies. At the end of the school year, the students were asked to answer a questionnaire in order to examine the influence of the web site on their extra curricular social interactions.

P2P Technologies

We have used different technologies to facilitate a variety of interchange and collaboration among the students. Here is a brief description of three main tools we used extensively.

BrowsUp

[BrowseUp](http://www.browseup.com) (www.browseup.com) is one example. At its core BrowseUp technology enables users to create virtual links from existing online documents. Although these virtual links are inline links, they really reside on a link server (and not within the page), and the original document is not changed. These virtual links can point from both pictures and text within the page, to associatively connected information like other URLs, the users local files (which are automatically published), and to new pages written on the fly by the user. Other users can view the virtual links while they access the URL from where the links point.

Figure 1. The BrowseUp tool bar in Internet Explorer 5.5



eQuill

“[eQuill](http://www.equill.com)” (www.equill.com) was a nice tool we have used. It’s a tool that streamlines and automates the manual process of designing, reviewing, approving, and maintaining Web sites. eQuill Markup Client allows to mark up, highlight, edit, and post notes to Web pages or documents directly through your browser.

Figure 2. The eQuill tool bar



Groove

“Groove” was a collaboration tool we found to be very effective. Groove enables a small group of students to talk, work, play, and share things with teammates inside shared spaces over the web.

Groove lets you create interactive shared spaces as needed, inviting the members you want, and adding tools that match the task at hand. Groove complements existing productivity resources—including Microsoft Office, email etc.—with tools for communicating, sharing information and working together (see an example of a [shared space](http://www.groove.net/products/individual/sharedspace.html) at <http://www.groove.net/products/individual/sharedspace.html>).

Groove supports also online and offline use, letting the group work with each other in real-time or disconnected whenever they like, providing ongoing meeting and project management. Groove works across network firewalls and other technical boundaries, providing dispersed and mobile teams with on-demand, private networks.

Groove sits securely on the users PC, letting them control how, when, with whom they interact. There's no setup configuration or server administration required. After installing Groove teammates can hold meetings, edit presentations, write new ideas, and much more altogether.

Figure 3. Groove personal accounts page



Figure 4. Some Groove's features



Forums and Students' list

We have provided a variety of topic-based forums to discuss issues raised during the class sessions. We have also posted a list of students with contacting information. There was only one student who didn't want her name and contacting info to be posted to the public through the site. The idea behind the students' list and the forums was to provide another mean with which social interaction can be enhanced.

Evaluation

We couldn't find an appropriate questionnaire to evaluate the social interaction among students while using a personal web site. At the end of the school year we have asked the students to suggest a list of questions that can be circulated among the participants to evaluate the social impact of the lecturer's site on their social interchange outside the walls of the classroom. Even though it's not a viable validation technique, we found it suitable for an initial attempt to develop such a questionnaire. Through a collaborative effort we came up with a list of 14 statements. The whole group of participants was then asked to evaluate the statements in a five-degree scale, from strongly disagree to strongly agree (table 1).

Table 1. List of Statements

Statements	Strongly disagree % Strongly agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
1. The site is a good vehicle to better socially connect the lecturer with the student.					78%
2. The site is a good vehicle to better socially connect the student with the lecturer.					76%
3. The Forum is a good vehicle to get updated on the learning assignments.	52%				36%
4. I am an active participant in the forum.	64%				26%
5. The forum helped me communicate with other students	64%				26%
6. I have received suitable answers to my questions through the forum.	67%				20%
7. The Forum can provide a suitable platform to have open social interchange.	29%				61%
8. I use the students' list posted on the lecturer's site to locate classmates' contacting info and email addresses.	47%				42%
9. The P2P tools were used effectively through the lecturer's site.	35%				30%
10. The site is a good environment to serve the P2P tools and accommodate social interchange between the students and the lecturer.	30%				54%
11. The site is a good environment to serve the P2P tools and accommodate social interchange between the students in the course.	20%				55%
12. The site with P2P tools adds additional social aspects to the learning process.	23%				63%
13. It's important to add P2P dimensions to academic courses.	17%				74%
14. The P2P experience was enjoyable.	12%				72%

Discussion

In recent years, there is a growing pressure on academic and non-academic lecturers to develop and post personal web sites. The motive behind this pressure is to promote the lecturers' professional image and the academic profile of their institutes. Most of the sites being developed aim at delivering personal information as well as a variety of teaching materials, assignments, and complimentary contents relevant to the interest and research scope of the lecturers. This trend is taking ground among the vast majority of the lecturers worldwide and across disciplines. In just a matter of a few years ahead, it is reasonable to speculate, most of the academic lecturers will have a personal visibility on the web either through private servers or their institutes' infrastructures. Therefore, personal web sites will probably take the role of teaching tool-aids for a variety of educational purposes.

Thus, at this early stage of the trend, it is important to develop new teaching strategies to better exploit the potential of personal web sites as teaching tool-aids.

The underlying assumption of this study was that personal web sites could provide more than it is accepted to believe today. The assumption was that this educational tool-aid is underestimated and it bears the opportunity to achieve educational aims that cannot be achieved through the conventional "brick and mortar" teaching environment.

Indeed, the aim of this study was to investigate the role of a personal web site in providing new opportunities to further extend social interchange either around issues being discussed in the classroom settings or around personal interchange.

The results clearly indicate that a personal web site with a variety and appropriate P2P technologies can further enhance the social extra curricular interchange among students and lecturer as well as among students themselves.

Apparently, one striking result of this study indicates that the students didn't see the Forums to be fit for their social interchange. Most of the studies (Burstall 2000, Corbett & Eikum 2000) that looked at the role of Forums in the learning processes did find some degree of learning interchange being achieved through Forums. However, it seems that this was not the case in providing social interchange, at least as it has been demonstrated in this study. One reason can be that of the nature of the Forum as public venue, which was not the preferred one in conducting social and more personal and intimate interchange. Another reason can be that of the nature of the technology while being set side by side with much more powerful P2P technologies such as Groove and BrowseUp.

Tomorrow's "brick and click" approach could provide new opportunities and challenges to teaching and learning—it would be a convergence of old and new teaching techniques. The Internet is taking the basic brick and mortar learning process—a physical location—and moving it to the click of the Internet. And this Internet presence has to be linked with the front end as well as the back end of Pedagogy. This study indicates that we need to reform our expectations from the click and brick new tools—on the one hand we need to lower our expectation from tools such as Forums, and on the other hand raise our expectations from P2P tools in the socializing process accompanying learning.

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