

Virtual Communities for Problem-based Learning

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Theme: Teaching and learning, Staff development

Summary

In this one-hour session Neil Ballantyne and Bob Munro of the University of Strathclyde (www.strath.ac.uk) introduced us to two virtual communities for problem-based learning.

Neil Ballantyne from the Department of Social Work introduced the course 'Family and Lifespan development' (see below for links to websites). He uses problem based teaching and online learning to provide students with possibilities to relate their inert knowledge to complex real world situations. The virtual community contains almost real-life examples of problematic family situations, with maps and images, demographic information, street scenes, QuickTime videos with interviews of family members, genograms of the family and other case material. There is an online discussion area to which all students and tutors subscribe. In this problem based virtual community students work collaboratively in small groups to make an assessment of the problems at hand in the case study. There are no lectures, but it was the tutors task to facilitate the online discussions, give feedback and monitor the groups. Students meet each other in the virtual learning environment and face-to-face.

After this course ran in a virtual environment the following conclusion could be made: the tutors found that the students in general were better able to use their knowledge in specific cases, the quality of their work was overall better (but this could be a cohort variation), the nature of the discussion is much more transparent and accessible to both student and tutor, the cases were more realistic through the use of audio and video and the role of the tutor had changed from presenting key ideas to supporting students reasoning.

Bob Munro presented a national initiative for developing a virtual community for learning schoolteachers how to use ICT in their education. The virtual community was not developed to teach teachers how to use computer software, but focuses on the pedagogical possibilities of ICT in schools. A CD-ROM and website were created which contained a Communications Room, Resources Room and Tutorial Room. When a schoolteacher takes this one-year course he is presented with exercises, resources and examples of good practice. Together with a tutor he develops a structured scheme for the possible use of ICT in his education. The use of this virtual environment has just got underway. Problems that are being faced so far are the difficulty of updating the CD-ROM and the amount and length of time that the development of this program took. Like in the example of Neil Ballantyne the tutors had to learn to work in a new way, less as a presenter and more as a coach.

Future plans

After the session it was agreed that members of this session would start a short survey on the quality of comparable British and Dutch ICT-for-school-teachers initiatives. It was thought that the quality of the work presented was very high and for this topic non-existing at this level in The Netherlands. Possibilities for use and transfer to the Dutch situation will be investigated.

Links/Websites:

- <http://cvu.strath.ac.uk/courseware/socialwork/fal>
Look at the Family and Lifespan Development module online, view the video's etc.
- <http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk>
The Online Tutoring Skills (OTiS) Project Website
- <http://www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/CAP/surfscot/ballantyne.ppt>
Slides of the presentation by Neil Ballantyne
- <http://otis.scotcit.ac.uk/casestudy/ballantyne.doc>
Case Study document about the course 'Family and Lifespan Development'