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Using Wimba Live Classroom for Student Engagement at a Distance

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Abstract

Synchronous online classes are becoming more common in education. Students are demanding quality educational opportunities outside the traditional classroom that are flexible and engaging. This article explores the virtual learning environment of Wimba Live Classroom that was incorporated into CougarView Vista at Columbus State University. Wimba Live offers the conduit that allows teachers and students to interact in a virtual classroom closely resembling the traditional face-to-face class. Students enrolled in two separate classes were surveyed to ascertain their perceptions concerning the Wimba Live experience. This article discusses the pedagogical, technical and interaction issues related to the Wimba Live classroom, and the students' perceptions of them.

Snacks and beverages are nearby. Your dog has settled-in under your feet. Perhaps you have changed into your comfortable clothing. The computer has booted-up, and your headset, microphone, and webcam have been tested. Now you go through the familiar routine of accessing CougarView and your course for this session. A few mouse clicks and you've arrived in class with your classmates and instructor. This procedure has all been done in the comfort of your home, office, or other convenient location. This is the virtual world of real-time distance education.

Wimba Live Classroom is an addition to CougarView Vista that is available to institutions in the University System of Georgia. With Wimba Live, instructors and students can meet online at any location and time. The major attributes of Wimba Live Classroom include: content display and interactive whiteboard, instructor and student real-time audio and video, application sharing, chat areas, MP3 and MP4, surveys, polls, testing, and class session archiving.

Columbus State University, along with the University Information and Technology Services, integrated a link to Wimba Live Classroom within CougarView so that instructors and students can utilize this synchronous virtual environment for teaching and learning. This online virtual classroom has been an essential part of EDUT 6105, a graduate level course in the area of instructional technology. This class has both traditional face-to-face sessions and Wimba Live sessions. Students can participate in the Wimba Live sessions in the computer labs at Columbus State University or at any location from which they have access to computers with an Internet connection and headsets with a microphone that can be connected to their computers. Students who want to participate with live video also need a webcam. Current laptops typically have these features built-in.

Many instructors consider traditional face-to-face instruction, which facilitates live interactivity, to be one of the most valuable aspects of teaching and learning. In

recent years, numerous institutions of higher education have developed and expanded online education and have sought mechanisms for integrating the emerging technologies of synchronous online conferencing (Kim & Bonk, 2006). A recent Sloan survey (as cited in Allen and Seaman, 2010) concerning online learning reported that enrollment for online courses in higher education has increased by 17% from 2007 to 2008. In addition, blended courses, which are a mixture of traditional face-to-face and online instruction, are also increasing dramatically. It appears that this trend will continue as the technology and pedagogy of online distance education improves.

Wimba Live Classroom provides a virtual live classroom experience that in many ways is similar to traditional face-to-face instruction. Students and teachers may find many advantages to this virtual learning experience over traditional approaches, and many users of virtual learning environments believe they closely emulate the traditional classroom for students and teachers (Lever-Duffy & McDonald, 2008). Teachers will discover that using the e-board function that enables users to annotate and draw on a slide or page to be advantageous. This attribute of Wimba Live is similar to using an interactive whiteboard in a classroom. Furthermore, guest speakers and lecturers from anywhere in the world can be invited into your Wimba Class session bringing students exposure to expert content specialists. Also, students can deliver presentations to the class utilizing all of the tools that are available to the teacher. In addition, the instructor has the option of recording and archiving any session so that it can be viewed at a later time. The many teacher tools in Wimba Live have made this synchronous online instructional resource comparable to traditional face-to-face classes and have taken distance learning to a

new dimension in many institutions. The goal for educators is to design online synchronous courses that effectively integrate technologies to engage students and improve the instructional process. The trend in education points to students demanding the opportunity to access educational opportunities without leaving their residences (McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009).

One of the major advantages of the Wimba experience is that it promotes interactivity. A study by Skylar (2009) noted that almost three-fourths of students prefer online courses that are synchronous with web conferencing capabilities rather than asynchronous online courses. This study supports the notion that participation and interactivity in online courses is a major factor in student satisfaction (Skylar, 2009). A similar study by the faculty at Athens State University discovered that students appreciated the addition of Wimba Live to their curriculum and feel that it helped to alleviate the sense of isolation that is common with online courses (Rich, Cowan, Herring & Wilkes, 2009). One student commented that, "I have taken classroom and online classes before and I can say that a Wimba-based class is already my favorite format. It combines the positive aspects of both types of classes" (Rich et al., 2009, p.11). Students prefer the features that are incorporated in technologies such as Wimba Live and generally applaud the "enhanced learning experience, improved communication, high levels of satisfaction with the course, and strong group cohesion" (McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009, p. 2).

Another factor to consider when utilizing synchronous online technologies is their appeal to diverse learning styles. Students convey that the different modes of communication increase the social interaction that allows some students to feel more comfortable expressing their views.

Many learners who participate less in traditional settings participate more in the virtual world of synchronous online interactions. These students are linking important pedagogical considerations such as increased engagement to the attributes of synchronous online systems (McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009). This is a major shift in the behavior of students who flourish in the virtual environment but avoid participation in the traditional classroom. Effective pedagogical strategies for online course design are imperative. Partlow and Gibb (2003) established that online courses designed with constructivist principles that are based on relevance, collaboration and providing learners with some control over their learning are key ingredients in student satisfaction.

Method

Participants

During two semesters of utilizing a blend of traditional face-to-face instruction and synchronous Wimba Live Classroom, a short survey was administered to the students in a graduate level course at Columbus State University to ascertain their perceptions of the two methods of instruction.

Materials and Procedure

The survey consisted of nine questions on a 4-point Likert scale to measure responses concerning distance technology and specific aspects of Wimba Live. One open-ended question gathered student reflections about Wimba Live. A class Wiki was also created to allow students the opportunity to freely discuss their thoughts concerning traditional and synchronous online instruction. Furthermore, the students began to initiate conversations on this topic using the class Ning site.

Results

Forty-six online surveys were disseminated during two semesters in 2009 and 2010, and thirty-two students responded to the survey (70% response rate). Additionally, many students posted remarks on the Wiki or the Ning sites. The results from the quantitative and qualitative data revealed a diverse perception of traditional and synchronous online teaching and learning.

The first few questions of the survey inquired about technology skill level and previous courses taken online. The responses indicated that 22 students were proficient or very proficient with technology. Seven students answered that they were somewhat proficient. Only three students believed they had basic skill levels. With the question concerning previous courses taken online, fourteen students had taken at least five courses online. Nine students had taken less than three and nine students had not taken any course online. With reference to Internet access, twenty-eight students had DSL or Cable Internet connectivity. Four students responded that they did not know what kind of Internet connectivity they had.

In response to the survey questions regarding the ease of use of Wimba Live, twenty-four students responded that their experiences were either very easy or easy. Only eight students had difficulty using Wimba Live. When questioned about the ease of using the microphone and headset device, twenty-four students replied that the device was easy to use or somewhat easy. Eight students had difficulty using the microphone and headset. Fifteen students answered that the audio quality was excellent. Twelve responded with good, and eight students said the audio quality was either fair or poor. Moreover, eleven students responded that the level of technical

problems using Wimba Live was non-existent. Ten students claimed technical difficulties were minimal and eleven students responded that technical difficulties were moderate. No students reported having severe technical problems.

The survey questions regarding the usefulness of the features of Wimba Live reflected an overwhelmingly positive response. Twenty-nine students found these features to be useful and only three students found these features to be not useful.

This survey provides an indication of the technical skill levels of the student population. Most of these students are digital natives who are capable of quickly learning the skills necessary to communicate with synchronous online tools. In many instances, students can offer suggestions and ideas for improving the virtual learning experience, and therefore, create a true constructivist learning environment. Of course, there are other tools available with Wimba Live that were either not used in the online class sessions or were not part of this short survey. Many instructors who have used Wimba Live recommend a gradual phased approach of incorporating the various tools into the virtual experience. The technique of progressively integrating new Wimba tools into the live class sessions will prevent students and teachers from being overwhelmed by all of the technology (Rich, Cowan, Herring & Wilkes, 2009).

The student comments, dialogue, and reflections that appeared in the open-ended question and on the Wiki and Ning sites have been condensed to disclose the positive and negative thoughts of the students who participated in this study. The following statements exhibit the range of responses to the Wimba Live Classroom experience:
Examples of negative comments:

- “Sometimes there was too much going-on at once and I had a hard time keeping

up. Especially with the messages in the chat area.”

- “My DSL kept kicking me off and I had to restart my computer.”
- “Couldn’t always hear everyone... sounded like they went in and out. Because I had to reboot my office computer, I came in a couple of minutes late and didn’t catch on as quickly to the polling. But after seeing everyone else, I got it.”
- “I did not change my setting to accommodate the headphone set, so I could not respond during the online class session.”
- “Initially, there were some problems hearing my voice and getting into the Live Classroom. After these things were corrected, things went nearly flawlessly.”
- “I think that once I get the hang of it, it will be fine, but right now, it is still a little intimidating because I’m not used to it yet.”

Examples of Positive Comments:

- “I really enjoyed the Wimba Online class! I think that using it in conjunction with a lecture based class would be really effective in encouraging students to participate.”
- “Wimba is much like a chat, makes the students feel comfortable.”
- “I loved this! I wish more classes met like this!”
- “I ran the setup wizard prior to class, and therefore did not have any problems.”
- “I loved the Wimba Live classroom. It was nice to have class but be able to stay home. I felt I got the full experience without having to travel.”
- “As a working mom, this type of online class is perfect for me. All I had to do was purchase a headphone/mic and run the set-up wizard and be live in the class. This is great!”

- “I really enjoyed the Wimba classroom and the interaction between the students and Dr. Moore. Seeing him through the webcam made it seem like a real classroom setting, rather than just an Internet class. I also liked all the tools that allowed different responses. I think many other courses should be offered in this manner.”
- “I really loved the Wimba class we had. I think it was just as effective as actually being in class face-to-face. The technology was exceptionally adequate, and I felt like Dr. Moore was just as accessible for asking questions as he would have been had we all been in a classroom together.”

From these condensed comments, it is apparent that technical problems presented a major barrier to some of the students and prevented them from gaining the full benefit of the Wimba experience. Also, a few students felt somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of synchronous communication that was occurring all at once. Conversely, students professed strong views on the benefits of this virtual classroom. Many students appreciated the capability of attending class without having to travel from their homes or other locations. Furthermore, the remarks comparing Wimba Live to traditional instruction are especially encouraging and reveal the value of continually developing engaging online instruction.

Discussion

Although this study was limited to only two semesters of a class that had a blend of traditional and virtual class sessions, it does reflect the potential of distance education. The goal for educators is to design online courses that are engaging and interactive with the personal touch that is essential for student achievement. In

effect, many students can flourish in the virtual classroom in ways that they cannot in traditional classroom environments.

McBrien, Jones & Chang (2009) found that students who displayed less interaction in face-to-face classrooms participated more in synchronous online classes. This concept is apparent to many who have taught in the classroom. Students who may be self-conscious have difficulty articulating in the traditional classroom. Other students communicate and interact in ways that are not always addressed in the traditional classroom. Wimba Live offers these learners different mechanisms for interaction and expression.

Many teachers have been using asynchronous technologies for delivering online instruction but have felt that this form of online education does not adequately improve teaching and learning. The literature suggests that the more faculty and students interact, the more meaningful the learning experience becomes (Rich, Cowan, Herring & Wilkes, 2009). Students who are not engaged and who feel separated from the learning environment can become dissatisfied with online courses.

Synchronous conferencing technologies, like Wimba Live, offer educators the ability to bring all of the positive attributes of the face-to-face classroom into a virtual environment. The easy access to Wimba through CougarView at Columbus State University, along with its powerful design, creates an exceptional format for online instruction. This study suggests that a majority of students in these classes had a favorable experience with synchronous online technologies. It is essential that educators continue to create quality online courses that take advantage of existing and emerging distance technologies.

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