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Lei Li
Southern Ploytechnic State University, lli3@spsu.edu

Samual Conn
Southern Ploytechnic State University, sconn@spsu.edu

Christopher Markham
Southern Ploytechnic State University, cmarkham@spsu.edu

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Lei Li
School of Computing and Software Engineering
Southern Polytechnic State University
Lli3@spsu.edu

Samuel S. Conn
University Information Technology Services
Southern Polytechnic State University
sconn@spsu.edu

Christopher R. Markham
University Information Technology Services
Southern Polytechnic State University
cmarkham@spsu.edu

ABSTRACT

In the distance education environment, one of the largest pedagogical challenges involves increasing student engagement and active involvement in the learning process. Built on the theory of constructivism and a platform of guest lecturing, the authors introduce a method that could put students in the driver's seat of active learning. Traditionally, guest lecturing is centered on the speaker. Our approach focuses on students, and as a result allows them to participate in each step of guest lecturing, such as preparation, interviewing, and reflection. The research methodology and plan are presented and the effectiveness of the proposed approach will be empirically tested.

Keywords

Student-centered, guest lecturing, constructivism, active learning

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has grown dramatically in recent years in the domain of higher education. While students enjoy flexibility and quality in learning through online education, student engagement is often a challenge even with well-designed-and-taught online classes due to lack of face-to-face interaction (Li & Guo, 2013). Studies (Ambrose et al., 2010 and Bean, 2011) show that students learn better when they are actively involved in the learning process.

One common practice involves instructors bringing in subject matter experts as guest lecturers. Guest lecturers, both in an online learning environment and an on-campus format, can bring relevance to the classroom (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009). Jennings et al., (2010) state that guest speakers can be used to enhance the sustainability of quality pedagogical methodologies and provide more real world learning opportunities in terms of time and space, as compared with traditional theoretical learning methods. Academic institutions seeking to embrace new paradigms, such as guest lecturing or speaking, seek to do so as a means of: (a) continuously improving pedagogical efficacy; (b) improving student learning experiences; (c) providing qualitative information to students from industry experts; (d) enabling interactivity and interconnectedness between industry and the institution; and (e) relationship building among faculty and community industry leaders (Jennings et al., 2010). Albrecht (2012) also argues that after the theoretical context of topics has been explained and discussed in previous lectures and assignments, a transitional experience as a constructive approach involving guest lecturing may be employed to reinforce learned material.

Online guest speakers have proven to be a highly effective and credible method aimed at reinforcing course concepts, and add breadth to course learning examples and activities within pedagogical events (Eveleth & Eveleth, 2009). Social constructivist learning theory that suggests collaboration between the student and others that occurs outside the university is essential for efficacious learning (Eveleth & Eveleth, 2009). Uniqueness, perceived credibility, guest speaker excitement, and initiative can be increased when guest speakers are invited by student teams; uniqueness is enhanced each semester as new student teams are made available (Eveleth & Eveleth, 2009).

Prude (2103) states the efficacy of online course delivery can be greatly impacted in positive ways as a result of virtualization combined with guest lecturing (Prude, 2013). Online faculty who effectively teach the student learning objectives in conjunction with online virtual worlds where making use of virtual world fieldtrips, synchronous communications,

animations, and guest lecturing can yield tremendous benefit and value-add to the student learning experience and achievement of course competencies (Prude, 2013).

Traditionally, guest lecturing is speaker-centered: the speaker delivers a presentation and follows with a short question-answer session. Students are often passive learners in the process, while they learn more when they are involved based on the constructivist theory (Klob, 1984). The situation occurs even worse for an online learning environment since the guest lecture is often presented in the format of asynchronous videos due to the difficulty in coordination of time between speaker and students. As a result, students do not benefit from guest speakers even though the lecture takes a lot of time and effort to deliver.

Constructivism involves a philosophy that encourages hands-on and collaborative learning (Taber 2011). This form of pedagogy has been identified as a necessary strategy for learner-centered approach in online environment (Gulati 2008 and Salmon 2000). In this paper, we propose to use guest lecturing as a platform to promote active learning through a constructivist approach. We argue that if we design the guest lecturing in a way that students can be actively involved, they will not only learn better, but also be more engaged in the class.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS

Built on constructivist theory, in this paper we introduce a student-centered approach for guest lecturing. The general framework is illustrated in figure 1.
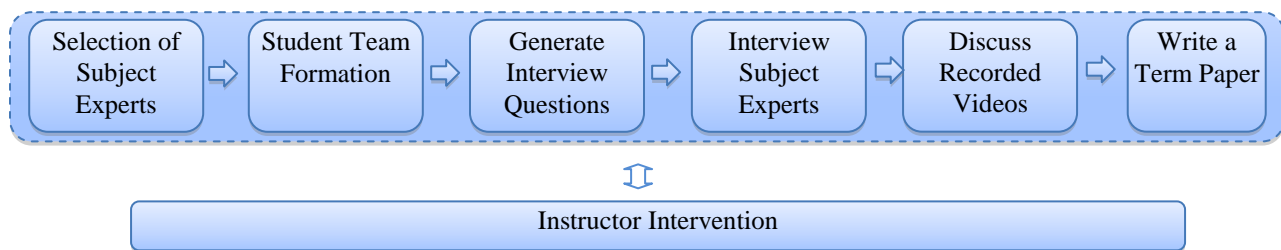

Figure 1. Framework for Student-Centered Guest Lecturing

First, the selection of a subject matter expert should be carefully aligned with the course content. The guest lecturing is completed in a pure question-and-answer format to facilitate student involvement. To simulate student interactions, students are asked to work in groups. In an online environment, student teams are formed using a discussion forum in the course management tool. Additional discussion forums are set up for each team to facilitate group activities.

Students first study the course content and then work in groups to determine questions for the guest speaker. The speaker is then interviewed in front of the class by an on-site course representative or instructor. The interview also can be accomplished remotely. The interview is recorded and made available to all students. Students then revisit the video and discuss their reflections in discussion forums. Ideally, a few more guest speakers get involved and the process is repeated. At the end, students review the series of videos, reflect, and write a term paper to summarize lessons learned. Students play a very active role during the whole process either working individually or working in groups. Activities such as discussions and a term paper are required to encourage student participation.

The instructor plays a critical role in this student-centered approach. The instructor needs to identify appropriate guest speakers for the class, set up clear expectations of students on each step of the approach, and closely monitor students' behavior and activities. On the other hand, the instructor should avoid getting into a dominant role in each stage except selection of subject matter experts. In another words, the instructor should act as a facilitator to create an environment where students can freely build their deep understanding of the subject matter through their close involvement in the guest lecturing process.

With the proposed approach, we argue that students are actively involved in the guest lecturing process and thus would be more eager to learn. The hypothesis of this research is listed as follows.

Given an online class, a student-centered guest lecturing activity can promote student engagement and active learning.

RESEARCH PLAN

We plan to implement our approach in an online graduate level course in a southeastern United States. The study will last one academic semester. At the end of the semester, a Web-based questionnaire will be used to collect data to evaluate the

effectiveness of the proposed approach. The questionnaire will be designed to collect the following information: demographic information of the participants, participants' satisfaction with the student-centered approach, and the level of student engagement. Qualitative data regarding this approach will also be collected in the form of open-ended questions. Both quantitative and qualitative data (a mixed method approach) will be analyzed.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we propose a student-centered guest lecturing approach to promote active learning in an online learning environment. The research methodology and plan are discussed. Our approach will be beneficial to our colleagues in higher education who are interested in increased student engagement and as a result, student active learning.

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