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Learning Management Systems Discussion Boards vs Social Networking Sites for Online Delivery

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Background:

We share our experience in using two different ways to engage students in an online learning environment. We used the discussion board/forum provided by the learning management system and a Facebook group as a means for the students to ask questions and engage in interactions with the classroom content (including asking/helping other students or asking the tutors questions). Students were enrolled in an online computer science degree. They were given a small percentage of their mark (10%) for participating in online discussions. This could mean either asking questions or helping someone who needs help. In order to get the marks, students needed to interact with the discussion board or the group at least once a week. The discussion board was associated with the unit and was part of the learning management system used to share educational content with the students. The Facebook group was a closed group created for the unit and the students who wanted could join – with approval from the lecturer. Joining the group was not mandatory.

Observations:

All the students had access to the discussion board through the university. The Facebook group initially posed some challenges: some students did not have an account and/or were not willing to use their account for school work. By the end of the teaching period, almost all students had joined the Facebook group – some even created separate accounts for the group. The students' discussions on the group were considerably higher than in the learning management system discussion board. The main feature the students liked was the ability to tag other colleagues or the tutor in their posts. This also helped tutors to quickly determine what discussions they should prioritize as students required their attention. Although some of the students were understandably sceptical at the beginning, their attitude has changed by the end of the semester.

Conclusions:

Learning Management Systems do not typically have a way to tag people in a discussion. This could discourage the students to ask questions on the discussion board if they want an answer from the tutor and send an email instead. As a result, the tutor would either (1) need to provide a personal email – which would both increase the workload for the tutor as students have similar problems and also would not allow other students to learn from this interaction; or (2) would post the question on the discussion board together with an answer providing duplicate work. In large class sizes, the ability to be able to determine what discussions need priority is important for giving students a timely reply and increase student satisfaction.