A Hybrid Approach to Undergraduate LIS Instruction: A Case Study of Organization of Online Course Information

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ABSTRACT

Hybrid courses, a combination of online/asynchronous and in-class/synchronous learning, are relative newcomers among the different types of course delivery options available to instructors. Along with them comes the need to develop and organize online course materials to ensure student participation and success with the online component, usually fully 50% of the course. A concurrent recent development is the movement to reintroduce classes in Library and Information Studies/Science (LIS) directed toward undergraduates, of which this course was one. This poster captures one such attempt at piloting and delivering a hybrid course in the field of Library and Information Studies by graphically showcasing the different online elements utilized in the course, their development and organizational implementation. It then offers analysis, provides a discussion of relevant theoretical notions and frameworks useful for contextualizing the observations made, and suggest several areas of and possibilities for future inquiry.

Topics

What is 'engagement' in a research institution? Information organization.

Keywords

Undergraduate LIS education, hybrid course, information organization, online collaborative tools.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of collaborative Internet information technologies has provided instructors in higher education access to tools that have the potential to greatly broaden learning environments beyond the traditional barriers of space and time. These new asynchronous combination in-person/Internet learning environments have given rise to a new instructional paradigm, known as the hybrid course [Reasons 2005]. The hybrid course is different from the traditional classroom model in that it offers both students and instructor the ability to engage with the course material beyond the confines of a group meeting at a specified time and place. It differs, too, from courses considered distance-education, in which there are few to no physical class meetings at all, replaced instead by course activities that are held exclusively online.

Hybrid courses, a combination of online/asynchronous and in-class/synchronous learning, are the newest of these pedagogical models, intended for students who reside and attend class on campus. A portion of the class does meet in person at a fixed class time. The other portion of the course time, however, is consecrated to online activities, usually asynchronous, and constitutes roughly 45% to 80% of the class activity as a whole, following the commonly understood definition of the hybrid course [Smith 2007].

A concurrent recent development is the movement to reintroduce classes in Library and Information Studies/Science (LIS) directed toward undergraduates. Since the professionalization of the library field and the development of the Master's level curriculum for library practitioners, many LIS and iSchools ceased to offer an undergraduate major or courses for undergraduates at all. Yet, in recent years, this trend has slowly begun a reversal, and some schools have returned to offering undergraduate classes.

2. PURVIEW

This exploratory inquiry captures one attempt at piloting and delivering a hybrid LIS undergraduate course focused on the "Information Society" by showcasing the multiple online course organizational elements, such as blogs, wikis, and online syllabi, employed in the course and the modes of informational engagement fostered by each. A preliminary analysis of the elements suggests a number of affordances and constraints, both hard, or technologically imposed, and soft, or socially imposed, influencing the development of these online course organizational elements. These include the architecture of the organizational elements themselves (e.g. the pbWiki platform), conventions of their use (e.g. what a blog should look like), the relationships and influence among those charged with their development (e.g. the role of the instructor and TAs), and the interplay of these factors with each other.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this case study consisted of elements of both participant observation, a relative newcomer to the research methodologies favored by LIS researchers [Baker 2006] and grounded theory [Glaser 1978 and Pace 2004] particularly instructive when formulating a burgeoning research agenda, launching a preliminary inquiry or examining relatively new or unstudied phenomena . The methods complemented each other, allowing for access, and offering qualitative, inductive approaches particularly useful at the nascent development stage of a research agenda and for generating conceptual observations and theories.

4. CONTEXT

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a large Midwestern Research I university with a School of Library and Information Studies, a pilot undergraduate LIS class was launched in the fall semester of 2008. The course, entitled "The Information Society," or LIS 201, was envisioned and designed as a hybrid course, with approximately 50% of its content to be delivered in in-person settings, and the other 50% to be delivered in several different online contexts and using several different organizational elements to engage or disseminate information to students.

5. ANALYSIS

Three actors, their influences and their series of identifiable affordances and constraints, some loose and some strict, informed the information organization of the course within and across its disparate online elements. Each of these independent actors functioned in relation to the other two in a dynamic process of exerting influence on each other with regard to the organizational structure of the course. The poster provides graphical examples of the elements themselves and illustrates the relationships and influence among the three actors.

The first actor influencing course information organization was the course instructor. The instructor's influence functioned in strict terms, when he directed the TAs to integrate specific information, information types (e.g. links) or organizational elements (e.g. a schedule) into their own online course elements. But there was also influence in the form of loose constraints on the part of the instructor, who was the first to create both the main course and section-specific blogs and wikis, which TAs could then use as a model. Given the instructor's authority role vis-à-vis the TAs, the influence of his organizational structure on the creation of the TAs' own should not be downplayed.

A second actor was the group of online course organizational elements themselves. Both the specific architectural parameters of the chosen Internet-based software tools and the conventions for their use for use influenced the information organization within them, with relative strictness and looseness of those factors varying among the elements.

The final actor exerting influence on course information in LIS 201 was its TAs, acting individually and collectively. Despite being granted relative free rein, the TA-created blogs and wikis were structured in remarkably similar ways. This like organization can be partially ascribed to the constraints of the software platforms, but the striking similarities the architecturally liberal elements (e.g. wikis) points to social phenomena of peer influence, collegial relationships and trust.

6. OUTCOMES

The poster identifies several directions for further inquiry, including qualitative measurement of student engagement, satisfaction, perceived success or failure with regard to the course online elements and their organization.

Another approach to move from qualitative to quantitative investigation could include the coding of qualitative observations already developed. For example, attempts could be made to quantify the ways in which the actors interacted with and exerted influence on each other.

One other avenue for potential future research could involve a more extensive use of the SI framework to engage with and understand the role of social relationships in the development of hybrid courses and their organizational elements. For this examination, the importance of the relationships among the course TAs could be explored within the context of SI and related notions, somewhat reconfigured, of social capital [Widén-Wulff 2004], trust [Cheshire 2004], and "social communication norms, group communication expectations, perceived cost and value of communication and the presence or absence of other communication tools" [Sawyer 2005].

Undertaking these and similar future inquiries could yield tangible outcomes for hybrid courses delivery, for "it is unclear whether the previously noted literature documents efforts to give students options to learn based on their needs or efforts to allow instructors the chance to use formats that meet their needs" [Reasons 2005]. Relative student success or failure may depend on which tools are chosen, how information is organized within those tools, and students' ability to understand, interact with, manage and produce new information within the online organizational framework provided them.

This poster is meant as the beginning of a dialog relevant to educators and researchers in education, LIS, SI and related fields. Its preliminary observations and their potential for future inquiry could help identify the factors influencing levels of student success or failure – a tipping point - based on how online elements are organized. Future hybrid courses could therefore be designed with that tipping point in mind, allowing students the challenge of engaging with organizationally complex and disparate online elements without becoming so bogged down in their attempts that other learning objectives are not achieved.

7. REFERENCES

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