Using Etherpads as platforms for collaborative learning in a distance education LIS course

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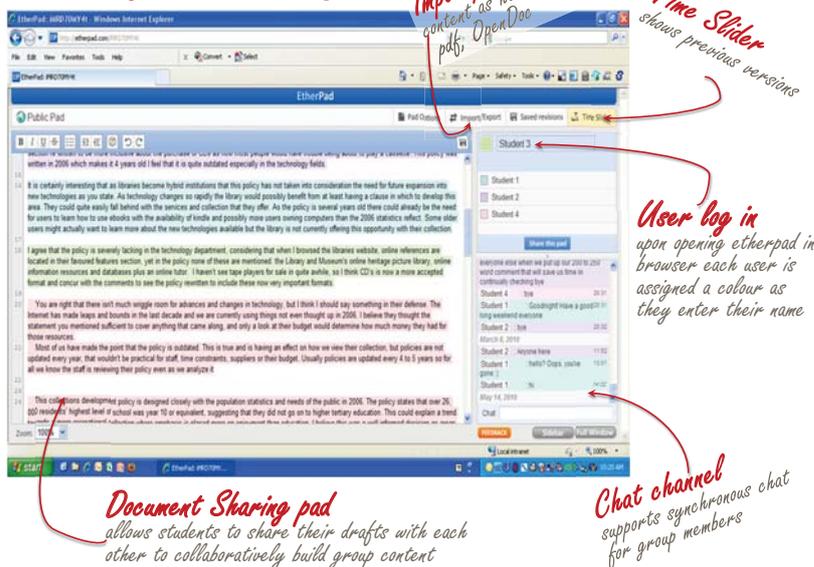
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Aim

To use *Etherpad* (document sharing and chat software) as the basis for a group assignment between geographically dispersed DE students that encouraged interaction between group members. The objective was twofold: (1) to create an authentic collaborative learning environment that engaged students with each other as part of the broader learning environment; and (2) to develop discipline specific skills in responding to the assignment.

Methodology

A class of 100 undergraduate students, all DE, from around Australia were randomly assigned to groups of four and given the task of examining and commenting on a complex collection development policy. They were specifically directed to share the work, plan an approach that involved everyone equally and to record all of their discussions, as well as the actual response to the assignment in the *Etherpad* document which, by use of different colours, shows the individual contribution. Marks were awarded individually, not to the group as a whole. Transcripts of all the discussions were analysed for discrete themes and attributes.

Distance education (DE)
+
online learning
=
challenges for student engagement, feelings of isolation & difficulties in building a collaborative learning community

Anatomy of an Etherpad

Import/Export content as html, Word, rtf, pdf, OpenDoc

Time Slider shows previous versions

User log in upon opening etherpad in browser each user is assigned a colour as they enter their name

Document Sharing pad allows students to share their drafts with each other to collaboratively build group content

Chat channel supports synchronous chat for group members

Results

Most students engaged actively in the exercise. Group discussion (four people) ranged from nil to nearly 600 individual postings over the one month of the assignment, with a mean of 68 postings. For most, the exercise does appear to have generated an improved sense of connection with the other group members and more importantly, with the program more generally. This is evidenced by the analysis of the themes.

Discussion regarding discipline based knowledge building and more generic university expressed undergraduate attributes

Evidence of building discipline specific knowledge was widespread.

"What performance measures/statements have been included in the policy to allow for public accountability?"

Evidence of thinking more broadly was less often articulated but did occur.

"The policy mentioned 3% population is indigenous Australian but the policy does not mention service to meet this community's needs!"

Its use as a social platform

Overwhelmingly, the platform served to provide a foundation for extensive social interaction... over half the groups had 40+ messages of friendly, social interaction.

"Everyone knows everyone!!! which is good in some ways! Next time you see xxx please tell her I said Hi and hope she is feeling better."

Its use in providing effective support to group members

This was strongly evidenced across the majority of groups.

"I've just read both of you paragraphs so far, wow! I'm impressed!"

"All done girls... well done to us... if I can pat you all on the back I would. xxxx, your part B and C are great!"

Its use as a problem solving platform

Numerous enquiries were made regarding use of the software, interpretation of the assessment task and generally seeking reassurance.

"I have downloaded it but still figuring out how to use it!! Can you put the actual references in or just the citation?"

Its use as a project management platform

The high level of social interaction tended to hinder development of direct management discussions. It was unusual for any one member to take a directive line, with all groups being very democratic although commonly, one or two members did emerge as effective 'leaders'.

"Are we all happy to leave it as is? or does anyone want to organise it? i don't mind either way."

Conclusion

A major aim of developing this collaborative assignment task was to encourage engagement, communication and critical thinking amongst students studying at a distance who traditionally have found group work challenging; and to assist in making those vital connections to help form a sense of engagement with their peers and their course. While further analysis of the wealth of data collected is underway, the researchers believe that the nature of the task, together with the technology employed, made a considerable positive impact on those involved, increasing their sense of being part of a cohort, encouraging a questioning, supportive environment, and making them feel more at ease with group work.

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