

Using Academic Online Conference in Teaching and Learning Process: A Case Study

Edin Tabak

University of Zenica
edin.tabak@ff.unze.ba

Damir Kukić

University of Zenica
damir.kukic@pf.unze.ba

This text provides a comparative analysis of the implementation of a teaching methodology that uses an online academic conference as an assessment tool in two different contexts. The comparison of the implementation of the methodology in different contexts indicates that small classes are not the best context for using this tool. In a large class, sharing of new information was very dynamic due to the strength of many weak ties, while this sharing decreased in a small class. However, the study found that even small classes with more strong ties can provide ground for new information, suggesting that not only a network should be treated as dynamic but also its nodes, since the nodes are changed in different situations and contexts, transforming the strong ties into weak ties and vice versa. The proposition is thus that creativity in learning process is result of network configuration of both different people and contexts.

Keywords: learning environments, online conference, assessment tool, social network, strength of weak ties

Introduction

One of the authors of this text has been involved in teaching a course at Curtin University in Australia that uses an online asynchronous conference as an assessment tool, and this method has been implemented in a course at the University of Zenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first part of the course involves writing the conference paper, improving it after feedback, and also designing and discussing how to run the conference and promote it. This students' collaboration and the online conference in the final stage of the course, around which the whole learning journey is designed, provide an authentic learning experiences with the assessment blending in with that experience (Allen 2011). This text presents a comparative analysis of using this new teaching methodology in different context – in a relatively large class in

a course at Curtin University in Australia, and in a small class in a course at the University of Zenica. The text first discusses the experience of one of the authors of the text with the methodology at Curtin University in Australia, and then describes our experience in using the same methodology at the University of Zenica. Finally, the two experiences are compared, and lessons learned from the experience are discussed.

The Previous Experience with the Methodology at Curtin University

One of the authors of this text has been involved in teaching a course at Curtin University in Australia that used this teaching methodology in 2010. The online conference was an assessment tool for two classes at two universities in two countries (culturally quite different). Students from both countries could write an essay on four main topics of the conference. There was an obvious dynamic conversation focusing on these topics. We found that different culture did not have any effect on students' conversation. The debate started very easy as four group of students share very similar interests. During debate, it occurred rather an increased curiosity as new students brought new information to the debate, which were not circulated in both classes before the conference. However, this had nothing to do with different cultures, but rather with involvement of the new participants in the debate. The students in both classes knew each other very well as they were members of the same class for almost two years, so it was difficult to get out with new information in the conference debate. Bringing together students that were completely strangers to each other enabled some fresh discussions, and this was probably the best part of the conference, which is probably the major aim of any conference in general: to meet new people, to hear different voices and opinions, and to get a feedback from someone who is completely stranger to us. The variety of students that did not know each other was another reason for success of a conference, as 'blind review' was easy to organise.

The second best feature of the conference was division of the course content on four different topics, which were focused, but enough wide for majority of students to find their own topic of interests. The conference topics, on the other hand, keep boundaries of the debate to not lose its focus. For example, student debating political question of internet communities did not often talk about online games and vice versa, which (we will see later) was a bit of a problem in the case study of the Bosnian university with a quite small class. This was important, as it was keeping discussion lively, and nobody feel that she or he talking to the wall. Each discussion had enough feedback, and there were not many 'blind streets.'

Students considered the conference as an informal part of the course, although the most of the total marks for the course were coming from the assignments directly related to the conference. A student said:

The conference was an informal mode of showing what we learn from the literature. It was a rather practical way to show your knowledge rather than an exam or quiz on which stress and luck have some impacts. The conference was for us like a laboratory for the science student in which you try, fail, learn from that, and then try again and hopefully make it better. So, the conference was not only useful to learn about an academic job procedures as I thought it would be. It is also for me the best way to comprehend the course content. I am sure this is not just because the course content is about social network, so the conference was an appropriate tool to learn about it through a kind of social network. No, it would be an appropriate tool to learn about any topic, from philosophy to the medicine.

It was obvious that informal features of the conference were important to foster students' creativity through the learning process of gaining some formal knowledge, set in the course objectives.

The Implementation of the New Methodology at the University of Zenica

Based on this experience, we have proposed to implement the same teaching methodology in the course of New Media at the University of Zenica. This section describes our personal impressions and experience in implementing the methodology to this course. Early in the course, the students were introduced to skills in conference writing, presentation, peer review, and management of an academic conference. The aim was to blend students' learning with an authentic academic experience. An early impression was that students enthusiastically accepted this method of learning. From the very beginning of the semester, they tried to think about a conference paper as their main task in the course, and they tried to take from the course themes the best they can to incorporate in their papers. These attempts to learn from lectures was also supported by an assignment which asked the students to collaboratively write the Glossary of New Media in Moodle, an open source Learning Management System (LMS) that was recently introduced to the students of Cultural Studies.

Moodle's module Glossary provided students with a normal part of aca-

demic life, which is learning the vocabulary used by practitioners and experts in the field. While the glossary module can appear as a merely index or a word list, it proved to be a powerful learning tool. One of the main objectives of any course is to introduce students with new concepts. Moodle's glossary modules provided a space for students to learn the new concepts, but also to learn to define concepts. At the start of the course, our aim was only to introduce basic concepts of new media. However, early in the assessment process of students' activities in formation of the glossary, we found a need to teach students how to write a definition of a concept.

In addition, these activities around the glossary were very helpful for students' writing of their conference papers. Some students from the beginning of the process realised that these definitions could be a part of their papers. In two cases, students developed the whole conference paper starting from their definition of a new media concept that they submitted to the glossary module. In other two cases, glossary entries from other students were departure points for two students to create their topic for conference paper and research questions for their projects. However, a weakness of this method was that an entry to the glossary was an individual effort, and many entries were often ignored by other students. But the fact that glossary creation as a whole was a collaborative effort made the atmosphere in the course more academic, which was a major aim of the course.

A student told us that the experience with an online conference was something that she really needed, as her plan was to continue her study at the postgraduate level, and her career goals were somewhere in academic world. She said that the experience in this unit gave her a better picture of what is actually an academic work, as this experience give her a touch of academic procedures through the assignment activities such as researching literature, writing a conference paper, writing peer reviews, and contributing to the discussion in conference. All these activities were parts of assessment of students' learning, and they were fully replicated from the real life in the academy. Students wrote an abstract for a conference article, and submitted it to the lecturer, who then sent a letter of acceptance in a form that was as close as possible to the real experience in sending the proposal to an academic conference. After acceptance, students researched their topic, write their papers, and submitted them to the lecturer as they would submitted them to an editor. The lecturer gave an article to other two students, who wrote a peer review of that article. After two weeks, the article is returned to a student with a mark and feedbacks. The feedback was useful to improve the paper, and to hopefully improve the marks for an article. Fi-

nally, an online conference was conducted during the last three weeks of the semester, where the students managed discussions on their own paper and commented on other students' papers.

Writing an abstract for a conference was a new experience for the students. One of the students told us that this activity was for him surprisingly the most difficult and at the same time the most rewarding task in the course. He said that he thought that this task will be much easier as it involved to write only a 150–200 words paragraph:

I thought it will take me an hour or two to think about the topic and the main argument, and then write a paragraph about it. But soon, I realised that this was not as simple as I thought, as brainstorming about my main argument led me to a completely different topic and research question. This required reading new literature and changing conceptual ideas. It took me a few weeks to come to an abstract that I was satisfied with. However, this experience was very rewarding. Not only that my essay was now much easier to structure and write, but also I have learned so many new things in the process, and it opened to me a completely new field of knowledge, about which I knew nothing before writing the abstract for my conference paper.

This is something that happened a lot in an academic work, and it is probably the best part of an academic life. So, it was satisfying to notice that a student get such an experience.

The students submitted their papers in week 8 of the course. We, the moderators of the course, acted as editors in this case. We wrote a letter of acceptance in a form and a style as a head of the committee of an academic conference would write the letter. During the entire course, the aim was to blend the students' learning with as authentic as possible experience in real life. The students were given two papers from other students to conduct peer reviews. The guidelines for conducting peer review was adopted from the guidelines of real academic conferences. The process of peer review was the same as in other academic conferences, where the students wrote peer reviews, recommending the papers to be accepted, accepted with minor or major revisions, or rejected. There was only a minor deviation from the real life academic peer review process. As the students spent four years together in a very small group, we thought that it would be easy for a student to identify who is the author of a specific article or a peer review, so we have decided to not present to students peer reviews of their papers. This enabled the stu-

dents to write 'more honest' opinions of other students' papers as they were ensured that nobody except the lecturer would ever read it.

During the whole process, the students show enthusiasm to learn academic procedures from the real life. They were very keen to blend their learning with an authentic academic experience, and they enthusiastically accepted this method of learning. An interesting part of the assessment was improving their papers after feedback. This was their first experience of getting a chance to improve their mark on essay after getting back marked papers. They found this practice very useful as they learned from their own mistakes. A student said that the experience of getting significantly better marks after improving citations and references taught him the significance of references. She said she always knew that, but the reward of getting better marks made her more explicitly aware of that significance. While the students were enthusiastic in all activities at the conference, we suspected that the online discussions could be influenced by the fact that students knew each other very well as they have a strong ties, being in the same group for four years. We thought that could be difficult for them to be more critical about their friends' papers, and more importantly they could not learn as much of new information as it would be possible in a social network with weak ties. However, there was a lively discussion going on conference as it would be in a social network with weak ties.

Comparison on Different Context

In both cases, the sequential processes of formal and informal learning could be noticed. Informal learning enabled creativity but this creativity could not be possible without formal learning. The formal learning provided a stage for the processes of informal learning. The moments of informal learning were more unpredictable and unconstrained, but also provided more creative moments as they enabled the most opportunities for what Sawyer and DeZutter (2009) call 'collaborative emergence' – contingent situations in which activities have unpredictable outcomes, and in which an action depends on a previous action. The informal features of the conference in both cases provided students with a space to try their knowledge, revise it, and then learn from mistakes. As a student from Australia described it: 'The conference was for us what a laboratory is for science students.' While formal learning used features of web media that are more aligned to the Web 1.0, implemented through a static page of the course textbook, the informal learning was implemented through the interactive Web 2.0 media. Web 2.0 applications provided an 'affinity space' (Gee 2004) for students' contextualisation of new knowledge. As such it enabled serendipity, which was a main source for creative learning.

However, this was not a case in building the glossary in the course as there was no an 'obligatory passage point' (Callon 1986) that could be used as a space for contextualisation, in which different interpretations could interact. Making not only glossary as a whole but also each its entry a collaborative effort could provide more such space.

Due to busy students' schedule, the students did not find enough motives to discuss other students' entries as they were not marked for this activity. We assume that encouraging students to comment on each other entry could open more opportunities for further circulation, thus further contextualisation and collaborative emergence created by perplexity and uncertainty of such debates. Bell and Winn (2000) argue that distributed learning systems, as self-organising systems, have to cope with uncertainty. The level of uncertainty within them should decrease over time until the participants arrive at 'an agreement over an understanding.' However, they suggest that although this imply the end of learning, achieving certainty about one thing creates the intellectual tools that allow discovery of uncertainty in something else.

One issue that surprised us is related to Granovetter's (1983) theory of strength of weak ties. According to this theory, the most of new information in a social network coming from weak ties, as actors with close ties know each other very well. The theory claims that new information have more chance to come form weak ties as the most information that circulates through a network with strong ties are already absorbed by the members of the network. The new information thus regularly comes from a weak ties. This was confirmed in the first case, as we have seen, when new students from other university joined the debate. The weak ties between students from two universities in two countries brought new information to the network, and the debate get on dynamics. On the other hand in the case of University of Zenica, we could not expect many possibilities of new combinations of information and thus we did not hope for much creativity in students' discussion as the most of students had strong ties between them being for four years in a small class.

However, we have been surprised with amount of new information circulating through these strong ties. We suspect that the reason for this was that these ties were not strong ties in every possible context. Although the students know well each others, the new nodes in the network were frequently created by new contexts and new information objects. A student reported that their presentations were often about the topics that have never been discussed with her friends at this course, so she was surprised by the fact that a friend had rich information about it. She described such situations as if the new information was coming form a weak ties and not form a good friend

– as if the friend became a new person in a new situation. The same happened to other two students, who were surprised by reading a conference paper by another student about his knowledge about digital libraries. This suggests that not only a network should be treated as dynamic but also its nodes, since the nodes are changed in different situations and different contexts, transforming the strong ties into weak ties and vice versa. It also poses a question whether creativity is result of network configuration of ‘smart people or smart contexts’ or both, that is ‘people in situation/context’ (Barab and Plucker 2002)?

The online conference enabled significantly more situations for creative moments than it would be possible in a traditional classroom setting. However, it was not enough to merely employ the Web 2.0 media in the course to burst students’ creativity. The level of creativity was highly depended of the ways how the media was used. While the conference application in both cases provided a space for creativity because it was used as interactive medium, in the case of University of Zenica, the glossary was used rather as a medium for one-way communication, preventing the interactivity, which could enable further circulation and open the space for multiple contextualisation. While the glossary itself was a collaborative work, each student worked only on her or his entry. There was no obligation to even read other entries. Despite some student reported a fruitful interaction with other students’ entries, the most of entries were never visited by other students. Our proposition is that if the way of using the glossary was such that encourages more interactivity, there could be more opportunity for contextualisation as more situations (and thus more persons-in-situations) could provide more weak ties. These weak ties in the case of conference presentations created uncertainty, which was a major trigger for the circulation of information practices and thus for distributed creativity. Based on this experience from the first semester, the next semester some things have been changed to improve the students’ experience. One thing that students had issues with was too wide area of discussion in too little class. Students were allowed to pick a topic on five wide areas of the themes related to new media. In the second semester, the students agreed to chose only one areas, which made discussions more focused. However, a single topic did not match all students’ interests, so debate lose a bit on students’ motivation.

Conclusions

This text provided a comparative analysis of the implementation of the teaching methodologies that uses the online academic conference as an

assessment tool. One of the authors has been involved in teaching a course at Curtin University in Australia that used an online asynchronous conference as an assessment tool, and this method has been implemented in New Media course at the University of Zenica. This text described implementation of those teaching methodologies in a large course at the Curtin University in Australia, and in a small class in the course of New Media at the University of Zenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and compared lesson learned from both cases. We found that linking the participatory culture of Web 2.0 media and the concept of distributed cognition (Hollan, Hutchins, and Kirsh 2000) and creativity can be an effective way in designing learning environment. This case study confirmed that Web 2.0 media could be used effectively in learning environments, fostering creativity that is distributed through media, individuals, and collective in a constant circulation in which formal and informal learning exchange. The formal learning provided an agenda and a stage for informal learning which was initiated with uncertainty and perplexity brought by formal propositions inscribed into information objects (web pages presenting new lessons, glossaries, and other students' conference papers). The students tried to interpret these inscriptions, and put them in new context through a web media which allowed the conference discussions. Such an online discussions enabled an interface for different contexts, which often resulted in rich distributed creativity in both cases

This study indicates that using the Web 2.0 media in learning environments can foster students' creativity. However, using the Moodle glossary module in these case studies showed that it is not enough to simply employ the Web 2.0 tools as the level of creativity depends of the ways of using the media. If the interactivity of the Web 2.0 is not fully used, and instead these tools are used for one-way communication, there is a little chance that they will create space for distributed creativity. The study thus suggests that there is an opportunity for further research on the modelling students' behaviour in learning environments enabled by the Web 2.0 media.

The comparison of the implementation of the methodology in different context indicate that small classes are not the best context for using this tool. In a large class, sharing of new information was very dynamic due to many weak ties, while this sharing decreased in a small class. But, this study found that even small classes can provide ground for new information, as even a good friend can be a weak ties in a new context, which can easily occurred in learning environments. Another weakness of a small class using the conference tool is a difficulty to define a topic for a conference to motivate students. In the first semester, we tried several topics, but there were not enough par-

ticipants in debate to make it more interesting. Then in the next semester, we tried with a single topic, but then a large proportion of this small class was not fully motivated. In short, using online asynchronous conference as an assessment tool is very suitable for a large class, while it can be used in a small class with certain conditions. For this reason, we proposed linking different small classes for an interdisciplinary conference, which can bring even more opportunities for 'collaborative emergence' that can only make more creativity to learning environments.

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Uporaba spletne akademske konference v procesu učenja in poučevanja: študija primera

Prispevek ponuja primerjalno analizo izvajanja metode poučevanja, ki uporablja spletno akademsko konferenco kot sredstvo vrednotenja v dveh različnih kontekstih. Ta primerjava kaže, da kolegij z majhnim številom študentov ni najboljše okolje za uporabo te metode. V kontekstu naraščajočega števila stu-

dentov je bila izmenjava informacij zelo dinamična zaradi moči številnih šibkih povezav, medtem ko je bila ta izmenjava oslABLJENA v povezavi z manjšim številom študentov. Vendar pa ta analiza kaže, da celo kolegij z majhnim številom študentov lahko zagotovi plodno podlago za izmenjavo informacij, kar kaže, da se mreža ne bi smela obravnavati le dinamično, ampak tudi njene povezave, saj se spreminjajo tudi v različnih situacijah in kontekstih, povezave do šibkih povezav in obratno. Zato potrjujemo trditev, da je ustvarjalnost v učnem procesu rezultat konfiguracije mreženja različnih ljudi in različnih kontekstov.

Ključne besede: učna okolja, spletna konferenca, ocenjevalno orodje, socialna mreža, moči šibkih vezi