USING AN ELECTRONIC DISCUSSION FORUM IN TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

I have used the IVLE (Integrated Virtual Learning Environment) at the NUS (National University of Singapore) for several years. In my opinion, the most useful part of IVLE is the electronic discussion forum. I will talk about some of the problems I had getting the students to participate, and what I have found to be the most effective ways to use the forum. I will also talk about my experience with putting solutions to the tutorials on the web.

KEYWORDS

IVLE, web-based teaching, electronic discussion forum.
IVLE DISCUSSION FORUMS

I have used the IVLE (Integrated Virtual Learning Environment) at the NUS (National University of Singapore) for several years. It has many features, but in my opinion, the most useful part of IVLE is the electronic discussion forum. Using IVLE, it is very easy to set up an electronic discussion forum for your class. You also get a convenient way of e-mailing both individual students and the whole class. In the past, I used to spend a lot of time answering e-mail from students. This took a lot of time, and would only benefit one student. After spending ten minutes answering an e-mail question from somebody, I would often right afterwards get the exact same question from another student! By posting my answers on the forum, everybody (who bothers to check the forum) will benefit, everybody will get the same amount of help, and I will save a lot of time, while still (hopefully) being seen as helpful and approachable. Since my answers are now available to all my students, it is also easier for me to justify spending that much time answering questions.

The first semester I used IVLE, I told people to not send me e-mail, but instead use the forum. I didn't get any e-mail, all right, but the forum was also conspicuously quiet! People were simply to scared to post questions, and with very little to read, people would stop checking it at all. Things would pick up the night before the midterm, but otherwise it was fairly quiet. I therefore told people that it was OK to e-mail me questions, but that in addition to replying to them by e-mail, I would post the replies on the forum. This worked quite well, and the volume got pretty high on the forum.

Unfortunately, people would ask questions in a very unproductive way. Many students would send me a long list of problems from the book, and say: "Please do these for me". I had to state in a firm, but friendly way, that I would only discuss questions if they showed me how far they had gotten on their own. This worked very well with some students. They would post
a long question, I would reply with a couple of hints, they would reply if they were still unclear and so on. Sometimes it would require a long sequence of mails to sort out everything, but it did not require that much time for me, since all my replies were brief, and it was very obvious that the students were putting in serious effort and learning a lot. In fact, these exchanges would often end with a very sincere "thank you" letter from the students! At the same time, I'm afraid that many students were turned off by my short replies.

However, the true potential of the forum will only be achieved when it becomes not just a way for me to communicate with the students, but also a way for the students to communicate with each other. So far, there are only a handful of cases where students have dared to answer questions from other students. I'm not sure how to encourage this. I have tried saying that I will count activity on the forum as part of the continuous assessment, but I have not really done this actively.

SOLUTUIOS TO TUTORIALS

I have also placed solutions to the tutorials on the web. I only provided outlines of the solutions; they were not intended to be model answers. I sometimes put some tutorial questions on the exam, as a way of making sure that weak students have a good chance of passing. This has worked fine in the past. Students who had paid attention during tutorials or studied their notes afterwards would get some extra points. But the first exam after I had started putting tutorial solutions on the web was quite a shock for me! They had obviously just memorised my solutions. My brief outline was being parroted back to me, word for word. Since my solution was only a rough outline, it was obvious that most people had no idea about what they were writing. At the same time, what they were writing was correct, so it was very hard to mark. It was clearly my own fault, but I wanted to mention this to warn people about not making the same error as I did!
CONCLUSIONS

In my opinion, the discussion forum is an example of how IT is only useful if it reinforces already good teaching. If you just want to scare the students away so you can spend all your time on research, then there's no point in setting up a discussion forum. It will only be of use if students feel you are approachable and helpful. Using IT in teaching is not going to solve any problems. Using IT is not going to turn a bad teacher into a good one. However, it can turn a good teacher into an excellent one!