

CETL-MSOR Conference 2015

Vesna Perisic: Facebook v Blackboard discussion forums in support of Teaching and Learning Mathematics.

We teach mathematics on daily basis to an extremely diverse audience, from mature foundation year students to a fourteen year local student with extremely high aspirations and ambitions.

We are aiming to build on students' extremely diverse experiences they are bringing when they join us and to satisfy their very different aspirations related to mathematics. Often studying mathematics is different from students' expectations.

For example, mathematical analysis, one of a very few second year compulsory modules, with its rigour represents, for a good number of students, one of the most difficult undergraduate module.

Evidences suggest that analysis is not only difficult for students to learn but it is also difficult to teach, to engage students into learning abstract concepts, concepts that often cannot be explained on or illustrated by real life examples. Analysis is too different from what the students have seen earlier in their education and often they do not have an appreciation for rigorous proofs or abstract concepts.

To improve students experience by engaging them better with their learning and to create a collaborative learning and teaching environment it is important to establish an effective and ongoing communication with and among all learners.

Firstly we are exploring how social media (Facebook) could be utilized as possible channels to support ongoing communication with students and among students.

At the same time, in collaboration with the Institute for Learning Innovation and Development (ILlAD), University of Southampton, we want to support development of students' digital literacies, including managing and developing their online identities and appropriate security settings, the skills that are essential for every student in the twenty first century.

Secondly, in parallel with the use of Facebook and for the same purposes we have created Blackboard discussion forums for the students who prefer more formal learning environment, and more clear boundaries between learning and socializing. With Blackboard as virtual learning environment (VLE), we have a long experience as a platform for uploading relevant teaching material and making it available to the students. However Blackboard discussion forums are less explored. Similarly like Facebook, but in more formal environment, students are not only encouraged to post module relevant questions they may have, but also to answer each other's questions.

Most recent upgrade to Blackboard and Mobile App for Blackboard made Blackboard more contemporary. We explore if by 'refreshing' Blackboard, discussion forums have become more appealing for students, in particular for those who are looking into more formal learning environment than Facebook.

We will share our experiences gained so far with different cohorts of students comparing social media such as Facebook with Blackboard, more traditional virtual learning environment.

Keywords:

Social media, Facebook group, Blackboard discussion forum, collaborative learning

References

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