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WikiGrads is a social space for reciprocal teaching and learning

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WikiGrads is a new social learning tool designed to streamline peer-to-peer (P2P) interaction, ongoing discussions, and social Q&A in traditional and online classes, on-demand (asynchronous 24/7).

In many of today’s teaching environments, we are throwing away tremendous amounts of pedagogical value by failing to provide a learning space that leverages differences in understanding among the students themselves. An online learning space designed to overcome the social and physical barriers to peer resources can deepen learning for all students. Effective social spaces for reciprocal teaching and learning are long overdue in education.

LMS discussion forums are inadequately designed for P2P learning because they lack the activity stream architecture necessary for sustaining interaction online. Streams uniquely facilitate many-to-many experiences that can deepen engagement and participation beyond what is possible in lecture or office hours.

We believe “discussion streams” will replace discussion forums and seamlessly evolve classroom and online teaching into blended environments for deeper learning experiences. Given our complex and evolving educational landscape, real solutions must blend our teaching spaces with social learning spaces.

Discussion streams make it incredibly easy to:

- Streamline intermittent (asynchronous) communication into many-to-many conversations and social Q&A
- Share files, web links, videos, LaTeX equations, and images
- Share multiple perspectives and representations of class material in a familiar and easy-to-use digital space
- Provide equal access to peer resources and impromptu learning opportunities
- Reduce office hours and amplify student voices

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Many-to-many discussion streams deepen teaching and learning

During my undergraduate (University of Colorado, 1992 - 1996) and graduate (Penn State, 1997 - 2003) studies in Chemical Engineering, I did homework and studied for exams with my classmates. Continuous interaction with my peers was necessary for me to earn high marks in my core classes. I would have achieved a passing grade working alone, but through collaboration I was able to learn and understand the class material more deeply.

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Peer-to-peer (P2P) interaction has always played a powerful role in providing deeper learning experiences. Dr. Alexander Astin, the most frequently cited author on student success in college, explains, “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.” Soon after arriving on campus, many first-year students connect with their classmates. Some students easily connect with both peers and upperclassmen. Unfortunately many others fail to connect with their peers, and miss many opportunities for interactive learning.

Our pervasive “weed-out” culture overlooks significant inequalities in peer resources among the students as well as the social and physical barriers to them. We rationalize that it’s the students’ responsibility to seek out their own resources, or make the time to commute and attend office hours or some kind of student success center on campus. Relying primarily on voluntary face-to-face environments for social support and communicative interaction severely limits teacher effectiveness, efficiency, and student learning.

For many students a STEM education, for example, is not accessible because we are not providing a social tool for P2P learning. Professors, whose jobs and salaries depend on research grants, don’t have time to provide the social support and interpersonal communication that is needed for higher levels of achievement.

More robust educational experiences require that all students have access to a safe P2P learning environment. From a pedagogical perspective, schools need to support the sociological and psychological elements in both teaching and learning environments (see figure below). Schools are failing to provide a mature “social constructive” space for deeper learning experiences. It’s imperative that we blend our traditional teaching and learning spaces with a social space for deeper learning using Web 2.0 technology. Please read our thesis entitled, **“Social constructivism in the 21st century: Inclusive support of deeper learning requires a blended approach using social constructive technology.”**