Dialogue – A Web Based Communication Tool Supporting Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

The Dialogue application is an innovative web-based communication tool that extends classroom boundaries and supports collaborative instructional goals. A key feature is the workspace environment in which professional dialogue is modeled and nurtured. For example, students in teacher preparation programs initiate dialogue that link the preservice teachers' university-based learning with field related experience in public schools. Another aspect is the shared dialogue across K-12 schools around student centered research projects. The Dialogue applications enables equal partnerships with community agencies, university students, and families. It supports networking and timely feedback to resolve issues. Additional features sustain communication and educational requirements of a learning community within a school and across semesters.

DESCRIPTION

The Dialogue Project has several facets. In its narrowest interpretation it is a web based application which provides the features needed by an instructor to create an online community (Conrad, 2001). However, this definition does not distinguish the Dialogue application from commercial software promoting online work. It is in the type of features that Dialogue becomes unique. These features center around the construction of conversations and resources and the sharing of information to promote understanding among all members of a community.

Dialogue's design and its features are envisioned by a team seeking to create a tool to meet the pedagogical needs of specific courses within the Syracuse University School of Education and K-12 classrooms. The instructors for these courses teach from a constructivist perspective, value the creation of conversation as an essential element in their courses, and look to the students to generate ideas and materials that will become resources for other class members both within the specific course and for students to follow in later semesters. In addition, the certification programs within the School of Education have their students in cohorts that move through specific sequences of field-related work. In several cases, the cohorts have moved from a group of students simply being in the same program to an active learning community. Creating a hierarchy that allows for communication among related courses is also part of Dialogue. At present, the hierarchy connections are realized through the ability to make announcements that are sent to all related communities via their "parent" community.

The Dialogue project has three discussion forums, called conversations. All conversations my be classified and titled allowing the members and the administrator to organize and sort postings for research, archiving, and portfolio building.

There are community-wide conversations that are shared with all members of the community. These community-wide conversations give each class member the opportunity to share products such as a lesson concept map, a photograph or an original historic document. A member may initiate or reply to a posting.

One-to-one conversations are for those events that are to be shared between a community member and the administrator, or between student and instructor. Multiple instructors are possible. One-to-one conversations may by replied to or commented on by the instructor. Comments appear attached to the posting. All comments are accumulated in a student's file across the life of the community and for the membership life of the student.

Small group conversations are among community members but private to the members of the small group community. The community administrator or instructor sets up the membership of each small group and selects the conversation format. Members may belong to more than one group within the larger community and with varying life-spans within the life-span of the whole community. Small groups may vary in the number of members. Conversation topics may be pre-determined by the instructor or initiated by group members.

Resources for each class such as a syllabus, videos, original documents, and other informative pieces are open to the entire community through the resource feature. Links to other web sites as well as video, audio or images may also be in the resource area. A community directory holds each member's profile of information to be shared with other members.

Through use of the Dialogue some of the lessons learned are in the area of interface design. These include the need for consistent display of images such as login, d-mail, and help across the multiple pages; the need for submission areas to be self-contained; the need for navigation to be non-linear and based on the use of a breadcrumb trail; and the need for consistent and specific vocabulary facilitating the multiple workspaces.

Other lessons include those that link pedagogy and design. These include that the display format of conversations makes a difference in the level of engagement in the conversation; that the management of small group conversations must be flexible and provide for a wide variety of types of groups; that the teacher's philosophy of instruction makes a difference in how Dialogue is seen as an instructional tool and determines the amount and level of use; and that student use and satisfaction with the tool increases with the percentage of communities to which they belong using the tool.

Dialogue has thus far been most useful to those communities based on the belief that students have a right and a responsibility to interact with different students and that they become resources for each other (Wexler & Tinto, in press). Questions that arise when infusing technology into such a course are: What kinds of conversation do you, as instructor, want to support? What kinds of conversations and use of resources will help students view an event through more than one perspective or lens? What kinds of conversations and resources will form a basis for students to construct their understanding of the content of the course? and What are the most appropriate technological tools to achieve these goals?

REFERENCES

Conrad, C. (2001). The dialogue project. Syracuse University School of Engineering Senior Thesis, Syracuse, NY.

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