Can web-based environments
Talk the Talk?
Case Study: Discussions with Students in a Blackboard Unit

Abstract

Web-based environments have become an integral part of education, business and industry since the Internet become universally available in the early 1990's (Calder & McCollum 1998). Many environments are built on a similar pedagogy of constructivism (Wilson 1995), allowing the learner to construct their own methods of learning (Bruner 1966). The opportunity of a more open and flexible learning style appeals to many students upon entering higher education (Barratt 2000). The processes that surround entering higher education can be traumatic for some students, moving away from home and having to cope with their own finances, often for the first time (Gatta et al 1997). This feeling of loneliness is often worsened by the apparent lack of communication between the students with each other, and the students with their new educators (Maher 1969).

This paper aims to discover if the use of web-based environments can enable a better communication link between learners and educators by providing a non-confrontational media that is unbiased in any way. A specific environment I would like to discuss in this paper is entitled V-Rep, meaning Virtual Representative. V-Rep aims to provide an opportunity for students to discuss openly their academic and pastoral issues with both their peers and educators, thus breaking down any communication barriers that may exist within the current higher education system. The idea is to give the students a voice, allowing them to feel valued, worthwhile, and an asset to the institution within which they are studying (Moorhead 2000).

This paper will look at systems of student democracy / advocacy within current education settings, and what methods are currently used for communication between students and their educators (Ayers 1994). The

paper shall also look at what support systems are available for students within higher education. The paper raises two questions; do the current systems work (the perceptions of the students)?
And could a web-based environment assist the students and educators to communicate in a more effective way?

The research will involve a literature review of current support systems available within higher education and gaining feedback from current and previous students involved in higher education. A case study of the operations being conducted within the current V-Rep system will also be included as a comparison to the more traditional methods of student / educator communication.

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