

PROPOSAL FOR CTLE RESEARCH GRANT

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Participant information

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Courses taught Fall 2011-Spring 2012: Technical Writing (COM 221HYB), Technology and Modern Civilization (HU 335), Visual Design (COM 364)

Research Study Description

This research study explores the effectiveness of asynchronous discussion boards, one of the most common features of online and hybrid courses. The study compares student perception of and performance using two types of discussion interfaces in four separate Com 221HYB courses through qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Blackboard is a closed network interface with Discussion Boards designed specifically for online education. It has many features that make it convenient for student and instructor, such as links to grading functions, grouping capabilities, connectivity to assignments, and communication with all users in a course. Open web interfaces such as blogs set up on Wordpress or Blogger platforms were not originally designed for online education but offer advantages for online student discussion as well. They are easily accessible, have little downtime, offer intuitive interfaces for including multimedia elements in posts, are used in professional environments, and are a part of the social networking tools that students are accustomed to. Significantly, these blogs may also be open to viewing by the students' parents, should they so desire, and anyone else with Internet access.

While both Blackboard and open blogs ostensibly seem to provide the same basic service in an online educational environment, they are very different interfaces, and anecdotal evidence suggests that they evoke differences in content and perception by students. It seems that students write using more natural, organic language on blogs and give relatively positive feedback on those assignments. They also tend to write using conventions found in social media and texting, such as unconventional spelling, shortcuts, etc. Students seem to find Blackboard Discussion Boards a somewhat more formal environment, drafting those posts more like traditional assignments. They criticize cumbersome usability of the interface.

For this study, in Fall 2011, two Com 221HYBs are using Blackboard's Discussion Board feature. In Spring 2012, two Com 221HYBs will use an open web Wordpress blog set up specifically for their courses. Students in both semesters will receive identical Discussion Board instructions -- with the exception of those changes necessary to adjust for posting in a different forum. All of the course material for both semesters, including schedule, texts, projects, and instruction will essentially be the same. Clearly, no two semesters are identical, and there certainly may be minor changes to adjust for errors and issues in the earlier semester. That could affect the outcome and would be addressed in the study.

The Fall 2011 hybrid courses have a total of 35 students. Spring enrollment is currently unknown but will likely be similar. All students must complete 10 out of 11 Discussion Board assignments. They may choose to do all 11 for extra credit. Currently, these assignments make up 10% of their overall grade and also count as attendance. If students don't post, they are counted as absent for that day.

All of the current Discussion Board prompts can be found on the site developed for the Fall 2011 course: <http://www.cosmicscribbler.com/erau/list.htm>. The full course schedule with syllabus and weekly modules can be found here: <http://www.cosmicscribbler.com/erau/Fall11Com221.aspx>.

At the end of each semester, all Discussion Board responses, replies, and attachments will be archived. There are three elements to the assessment of data that will be discussed:

- **Quantitative review of Discussion Board posts.** Posts will be quantitatively evaluated on the following criteria:
 - percentage of grammatical/technical error
 - length
 - number of non-required posts by user and replies
 - Scaled rating by reviewer will be developed evaluating the overall quality of the post in terms of critical thinking and quality of writing
- **Student survey.** Using SurveyMonkey, the students will complete a short survey requesting feedback on their perception of the Discussion Board element of the course.
- **Student interviews.** Open-ended, semi-structured interviews with a volunteer sample of the students will be conducted by the researcher to aid in understanding their self-perception of learning in the course.

The results could be interesting not only in terms of identifying how to better use Discussion Boards in hybrid and online courses, but also in understanding what drives students to “engage” in online discussion rather than just “post” to a board. “Discussion” has been one area of online education that, I believe, has not progressed very far. The results of this study may also impact how to develop other areas of course content.

Potential Publications/Presentations

The results of this research may be presented at any conference or published in any journal focusing on online education, asynchronous learning networks, technology and education, or teaching and learning through social networking media, as well as general education. A few examples are: *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, and *The Journal of Technology Education*.

Resource Requirements

Courses: My workload for the 2011-2012 includes four courses/three preparations in Fall 2011 and four courses/two preparations in Spring 2012. I’m teaching two hybrid courses each semester.

Current pubs/presentation: I am presenting a paper at the PCAS/ACAS conference in Fall and plan to co-present at the PCA/ACA conference in Spring. I am currently involved in one joint research project about healthcare communication using social media, and I am preparing my dissertation for publication to be completed in Summer 2012.

Service commitments: I currently serve on the COAS Recruitment Committee, am course monitor for HU335, and advise approximately seven Communication students.

Resources required: I don’t anticipate requiring any special resources to do this research, with the exception of help aggregating the numbers ...

Departmental Support

My department chair, Donna Barbie, supports my pursuit of this research project, and the results would benefit my department and students. The findings may help to shape my own classes, as well as other faculty using online Discussion Boards in both hybrid and traditional settings.