Fostering critical thinking through online student collaboration across Universities
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Abstract
Through the use of the Blackboard Learning System (v. 6) an online collaboration course was set up to foster critical thinking via collaborative learning among students from two different universities. The course design using the Blackboard Learning System focused primarily on the use of the discussion boards to generate two-way communication among students and faculty. Evaluation instruments for both the learning outcomes and the learning process were developed for use.

Brief Paper Description
An inter-university online collaboration experience was initiated by faculty from the George Washington University and American University in Washington DC to explore the impact of using a number of different web-based technologies via collaborative learning techniques. One of the tools being used is the Blackboard Learning System v. 6. A special academic use course was set up and designed by the Center for Instructional Design and Development (CIDD) at the George Washington University to facilitate this inter-university collaboration among faculty and their students.

There is evidence in the literature that collaborative learning can contribute to an enhanced learning process for the learners in terms of their problem-solving skills and their abilities to perform higher-level intellectual skills. “The peer support system makes it possible for the learner to internalize both external knowledge and critical thinking skills and to convert them into tools for intellectual functioning” (Gokhale, 1995). Critical thinking is defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking (NCECT) as “…the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.”

The course design using the Blackboard Learning System v. 6 focused primarily on the communication aspects to foster critical thinking through collaborative learning methods. The course was designed around the use of the discussion boards. An Introductions discussion forum was developed to promote a sense of community among the students. Four additional discussion forums were set up to provide students the opportunity to engage with each other in terms of content. Each forum was set up to relate to a discussion theme - Culture and Geographic Indication, Development, Ecological issues, and Security. The students from both universities were assigned to each forum by their respective instructors based on their case study topics. In order to give ownership of the discussion to the students and enhance motivation, the students are expected to take turns being discussion leaders (forum administrators). It is expected that, given the collaboration in groups via the discussion boards, the students will be able to identify common issues in each discussion forum theme area and generate ideas that they can in turn incorporate in their own case studies. The students are also expected to self-assess the benefits of this collaboration. A web-based survey has been developed to evaluate the process and learning outcomes. The survey was developed using Flashlight Online – a tool available by the Teaching Learning and Technology Group that includes approximately 500 validated questions on the use of technology in teaching and learning.

This is a work-in-progress project to be completed at the end of the Spring 2004 semester (May 2004). The course itself will be demonstrated and the results of the evaluations will be shared with the audience.

Preliminary References

National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking (NCECT) http://www.criticalthinking.org/