Presentation Abstract

The Virtual Office: Connecting Students Together across Classes and Disciplines

After teaching online for a period of time I missed the interaction I would have with students in my office, a place where past and present students would pop in to ask a question about a class, touch base on how other classes are going, or just to pass time between classes. In order to approximate this office feel, I opened an account on the Ning social networking site. I chose this site because it would allow the group to be private and would be accessed by invitation only. I currently teach a total of three online classes in any given term and invited students from all of my classes to check out the office and use it as you would use a real professor’s office: to chat on the discussion board, hear my thoughts on current events on the blog, or post pictures so that we can all put faces to names.

Initial response was quite light, but soon I was seeing pictures of students, their families, and their pets posted on the virtual bulletin board. There was some interaction with me, but most of their interaction was with each other on their own Ning account pages, approximating the interactions students from various classes would have in the hallways outside of the professor’s office. I hope to expand the office space with a resource center including links to web sites or documents containing information about the discipline of Sociology, or perhaps a student lounge where they can chat with one another. As terms go by, I hope to see past students pop in to see what the present students are doing, and to let me know how they have been since they left my class. I left a University with a dynamic and social student population to teach online and miss the daily interaction with students. It is my hope that a virtual office space can bring some of that element of connectedness to the virtual university.