ONLINE INTERACTIVE FORUMS AS A LEARNING TOOL AMONG THE MEDIA STUDENTS-AN ANALYSIS

Assistant Professor Dr. S. ARULCHELVAN
Department of Media Sciences
Anna University, Chennai, INDIA

ABSTRACT

New media is giving a new avatar to the education. Especially the second generation of web is drastically altered the education and teaching-learning patterns. Online forum is one of the tiny kids of new media and act as a vibrant tool for the learners. A forum allows many people to chime in about their experiences, information, technical knowhow, etc. It is an online communication between multiple users through text, voice, video and more. Throughout the world billions of forums are exist. This research was carried out to study the role and usage of online forum among the media students during the year 2010. The specific objectives of the study were to know the awareness; analyze the process and usage pattern; to find out the effectiveness and other dimensions of the online forums among the media students. Content analysis, survey and in-depth interview methods were used to find out facts. Forum's contents like visual appearance, interaction, navigations, interface, etc. were analyzed. Survey was conducted among the media students.

In-depth interview was done among the experts. The research has found the following important facts: Online forums are acting better platform for the media students. The users frequently visited the forum and follow the thread. Most of the students post their doubts, queries on the particular topic and got many reply answers from other members like peers, experts, etc. They also exchange their views and clear doubts. It increases their capacity, subject knowledge, etc. Online forum is a cost effective method and a better tool for education.

Keywords: Online interactive forums, Interactivity, e-learning, Media Students.

INTRODUCTION

New media is giving new dimensions to the education. Especially the second generation of web is drastically changed the education and teaching-learning patterns. Online forums are prevalent in several developed countries. Throughout the world billions of forums are exist and some of them are popular. Forums are growing every day. Online forum is one of the tiny kids of new media and act as a vibrant tool for the learners.

Online forum is the use of the internet to access the content, views, opinion, suggestions and resources. Online forum is a social space located in three dimensions like group atmosphere, cohesiveness and participation. A forum allows many people to chime in about their experiences, information, technical knowhow, etc. It is an online communication between multiple users through text, voice, video and more.

A forum is an online communication between multiple users, generally through text-style communication occasionally through voice. Internet forums really began as an off-shoot of the neighborhood bulletin board, where you would go and post your want ads or what you needed or maybe, try and get some business basic places where communities would come together and find information about various topics. A forum consists of a tree like directory structure containing at the lowest end topics commonly called threads and inside them posts. Logically forums are organized into a finite set of generic topics usually with one main topic driven and updated by a group known as members, and governed by a group known as moderators.

The posters to the forum are considered the driving force behind the community. On some forums, a poster may edit or delete his or her posts, although sometimes these rights are reserved. Western-style forums often allow an avatar and signature. The forum signature consists of text or images defined by the user and appended at the end of each of his posts. Both fundamentally are just expressions of the user's creativity, although many forums extend their rules to signatures. The moderators have access to all posts and threads in their area of responsibility; it is common for a knowledgeable and trustworthy member to be promoted to moderator for such a task. Moderators also answer users' concerns about the forum, general questions, as well as responding to specific complaints. A post is a user submitted message enclosed into a block containing the user's details and the date and time it was submitted. Members are usually allowed to edit or delete their own posts. The classic way to show a member's own details such as name and avatar has been on the left side of the post, in a narrow column of fixed width, with the post controls located on the right, at the bottom of the main body, above the signature block. A thread is a collection of posts, usually displayed by default from oldest to latest; although the option for a threaded views a tree-like view applying logical reply structure before chronological order can be available.

A thread's popularity is measured on replies. Some forums also track page views. Threads meeting a set number of posts or a set number of views may receive a designation such as "hot thread" and be displayed with a different icon compared to others threads.

A private message is a message sent in private from a member to one or more other members. The ability to send carbon copies is sometimes available. Private messages are generally used for personal conversations. Online forums has many positive aspects like group discussion, professional interaction, portfolio sharing, Industry updates, categorized topics discussion, suggestions on hardware and software, tools sharing, enhanced career options, profile enhancement, professional contacts, collaborative learning. All these options in forums are not used by everyone using the forums. Role of forums and portals every media company has a forum as a part of it, to develop the site traffic and to have it as an elearning part. Self learning can be easily motivated through essential source like online forums.

Share and Learn is the new trend in online forums by which everyone uploads their knowledge database in forums. This research draws upon the awareness, availability, and usage of online interactive forums. Aim of the study is to study the usage of Online Interactive Forums as a learning tool among media students. The primary objective of this paper is to determine the awareness and effective usage of online forums among media students. This paper attempts to provide the usage of online forums as an E-learning tool.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many research studies are supported that the online interactivity tools helps the learning process. (Rudestam et al, 2002) explains that online learning solutions can provide more collaboration and interaction with peers and experts as compared to traditional instruction. They suggested that interaction is facilitated by the fact that the instructor does not monopolize student attention in an online learning environment.The role-playing, simulations, streamed video, project teams, chat rooms, bulletin boards, online references, personalized coaching, and email as some techniques that could help create an interactive online environment. Saul Carliner (2008), says that the focus on the interaction between learning styles and the media, methods of instruction and group functioning in a distance learning class using audio-graphics and computer-mediated communication. They find that learning styles do not impact how students interact with media and methods of instruction, but does affect satisfaction with other learners.

According to Stephenson (2001), online interactive learning environments appear to provide a perfect forum for an academic discourse that promotes increased student engagement, critical analysis and reflection, and the social construction of knowledge. Dawley (2007) says that the wide spread applications of e-learning technologies to education at all levels, increasing number of online educational resources and messages are generated from the corresponding e-learning environments. Accordingly, instructors are often overwhelmed by the huge number of messages created by students through online discussion forums.

William Horton & Katherine Horton (2003) says commercial e-learning providers called portals have emerged offering courses, content, collaboration, and community. These providers are partnering with one another and other organizations in order to offer a through library of content and making digital learning a digital business. Kelly, et al (2007), says e-learning environments establish a framework for regular contact between student and instructor as well as collaborative activities between students, without the requirement of a face-to-face encounter. Kear & Heap (2007) explains that the e-learning environment, computer conferencing including discussion forums provides a framework for peers or student to student interaction and learning. The learning process is aligned with a more constructivist view of learning where knowledge is not seen as transferred from one person to another but rather the learner is actively taking part in the learning process. Mark Guzdial & Jennifer Turns (2000) provides information about the online discussion forum (message/bulletin board) is for asynchronous written communication among participants, who send messages (posts). Computer-mediated online communication forums allow for learning which integrates student interaction.

Online discussion forums are a valuable resource for people looking for information, discuss ideas, and get advices. Unfortunately, many forums have too much activity and information available, resulting in information overload (Andrew, 2003). Thomas (2002) explains the discussion forum is a significant component of online courses. Instructors and students rely on these asynchronous forums to engage one another in ways that potentially promote critical thinking, meaningful problem solving, and knowledge construction. He suggested that online discussion forums can lead to enhanced learning outcomes for students. The typical nonlinear branching structure of online discussion may be insufficient for the realizations of truly conversational modes of learning Dixson, et al, (2006), supports that the online mode of course delivery through discussions permit greater flexibility for participants with the opportunity of studying almost anywhere at anytime.

According to Wozniak & Silveira, (2004), the potential of online discussions to reduce the instructor's forum related workload, though a prudent instructor would remain abreast of the dialogue to offer timely support and guidance if required the student as facilitator related to level of content expertise/knowledge and standing amongst peers.

Yi-fang Brook Wu & Xin Chen (2005), presents a novel approach that automatically assesses student performance by analyzing knowledge density in online interactive messages. Performance of students is evaluated from three perspectives, three measures - knowledge density, message length, and message count. Rose, et al (2004), focuses on the predominantly used methods for assessing the content and outcomes of online forums has often been limited to frequency counts and other quantitative measures. This study compares the application of two content analysis protocols for online discussion boards by applying both to the content of a one-week student-led discussion.

From the literature review following facts are established. Majority of the peer learning are found using the asynchronous discussion systems while some are unaware users of it. The scope of effective discussion through a computer-mediated anchored forum as a smart online tool are getting used at a fast pace for learning. Meaningful learning and argumentation skills via online forums are seen evolving to a platform which can hold all the information. The future of online learning will be based on portal platforms like online forums as more number of users is shifting towards online media.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, content analysis is included to study how the online forum is developed on contextual structure, visual design and the usability design along with an in-depth analysis of features provided in the forum. Content analysis is carried out for the vfxtalk forum since the CSS structure of the forums are similar in working respectively. Content analysis of the forum is carried out in different stages. Survey for this study is carried out to find out the awareness and the usage of online forums among the media students. People who are doing media courses and the students who use internet are the target audience for this survey. Using a questionnaire as a tool in this methodology, the awareness of online Interactive forums, the exposure of the online interactive forums among the media students, their involvement to forum, their understanding got from the forum discussion, the usage of forums in other ways of learning enhancement can be calculated. Survey carried out among the 250 students from different media courses. Using the simple random sampling of the population and all the above variables the overall awareness and the usage of online forums among the media students is to be calculated. An online interview is a form of online research method. There are different forms of online interviews: synchronous online interviews for example via chat technology and asynchronous online interviews for example via email.

The Interview was conducted with, administrator of "compositorsclub" forum an online forum dedicated for visual effects and animation field. Many media students are part of this forum. The interview was taken through online email. The interview questions are based on the information on how the online forums are used as a learning tool and the ways to improve the usage among media students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the collected data from the surces through various methods are presented and discussed here.

Content Analysis on Forum

In this research an online forum called VFXTalk (compositirs club) is selected for analysis. The vfxtalk forum as a dedicated discussion forum for media students to discuss about the visual effects field based on the various categories segregated on content has a membership of 21,190 people and the active members in the forum are about 3,484 people. The forum has the backend supporting moderators of 20 people has 6 super moderators. These moderators look into the discussions whether the posts and the threads are posted correctly and these moderators play important role in moderating the discussions and regulating it as if done in a physical forum of discussion.

Visual Design And Presentation Factor

The forum, vfxtalk forum are analyzed based on the factors that include colors used in the forum design from background color, logo color, tabs design model, navigation button design, look and feel of the forum, presence, the advertisements and other attractive visual elements like smileys, icons. All the factors like colors, look and feel play a vital role when involving in the forum for discussion because they are responsible for user retention, and interest. Analyzing the presence and placement of these elements are necessary so as to evaluate how well the people use the forum for discussion. In vfxtalk forum, cool colors like dark blue, light blue were used for content black and white were mostly used. The font size of the content is 11pixel based on the readability factor. The font used for the content is mostly Arial and Calibri for the content posted by the user can change these default settings. The smileys are used to express the user expression over the content posted. The icons are represented to show the update in the current thread and posts. The look and feel of the forum is clean and good thus helpful in retention of the user in the forum. Forum logo is designed with a theme of a ball rotating a circle which represents the learning circle the forum is designed navigation tab having basic navigational buttons followed by visual banner ad then the visitor information tab giving registration information status in the forum which is followed by the Folder status of the forum with a small login form. For easy navigation forum is updated by displaying Hottest Threads, Most Viewed Threads and latest Posts information. There is a three line descriptive welcome note to the viewers about the website followed by the forum contextual structure.

Usability Design Factor

The Usability design factors of the forum vfxtalk forum are analyzed based on the sub parameters of categorization of the usability in the forum which are helpful in the user interaction and involvement, the navigation design helpful in the content navigation and the updated flow in forum discussion, the information architecture of giving the user right information at the right place, the shortcuts to the content, usability to the popular content like the recent posting, hottest threads and the most viewed threads and posts in the forum. The information like current number of viewing, the current users online are also listed at the bottom of the forum. The dock able design in the forum gives the user to navigate between the categorized topics discussions easily, the dock able tabs are designed to be dock and undock the segregated discussion topics the user would use this to navigate easily to the content.

In the home page the information about the hottest threads which is the has higher postings replies and comments in the forum for discussion, followed by the most viewed thread are displayed helps in showing the highly visited threads to easily get in to that forum topic discussions, the latest posts is the latest thread posted in the forum by the users these informations are given under a tab above the forum with the title Top 5 Stats. This gives the user to get in to the topic discussions easily and directly and gives an easy user experience

Starts Hottest Threads

The Forum layout design is a basic five column table layout which covers new posts identification by the help of the icon based indication helps the user to easily identify that a new posts been made in this particular topic forum, the forum topics with brief introduction about that particular topic covered with number of viewings which says the user currently how many of them are viewing this particular forum , then the last post in that forum information gives an idea to the user about the what was the last post posted in the thread with the information covering post title with the member name who posted it with the date and the time of posting. The number of posts and threads in that forum is also updated. The Registered users has some advantages of the registered users only see 1/2 the adds that regular users see, They also have thread Subscription by which the user can easily get the update about the particular thread and these users can also rate the thread which helps in ranking and other users ideas.
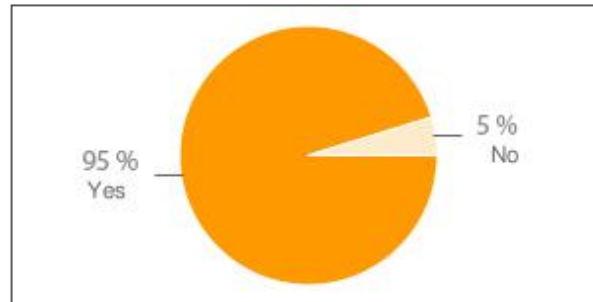
Contextual Structure Fact

The contextual structure analysis is the basic analysis done with the content of the forum how it is divided in the forum for the discussion of the user by the basic contextual segmentation in the forum. The content are segregated in this forums based on the factors like core topics, the softwares, tools, concepts, administration, resource sharing, competitions, professionals corner these contextual segmentation are done for easy discussion and to have an easy track our the discussion, there are various file types that are supported in the forum which can be shared in the forum discussion in assisting the basic textual discussion. The analysis of the forum content is done by the parameters of the number of total core topic segregation in the forum, the number of sub forum topic segregation the total number of threads, the total number of posts. The vfxtalk forum consists of a tree like directory structure containing at the lowest end topics and inside them posts. Like all other forums, vfxtalk are organized into a finite set of generic topics with one main topic driven and updated by the user group members, and governed by the group of moderators. The Vfxtalk Forum segmentation and structure follow this tree like directory structure. The vfxtalk Forum is divided into various segments which segregate the information based on the context need helps in easy administration and in user accessibility.

Visual Effects Packages

The contextual structure allows in the forum to attach files in the forum discussion, an attachment can be almost any file. When someone attaches a file to a post they are uploading the file to the forums' server. In vfxtalk Forum usually have limit on what can be attached and what cannot among which the size and the types of files can be attached are listed. File Attachment – Attach file from computer, attach file from URL. The file formats supported by the forum can be attached in forum posting. There are various contextual segmentations are done in this forum and the topics are segregated based on various topics. These topics have number of posts and threads. The current total number of threads and posts are given. The researcher adopted the content analysis of the forum vfxtalk which is a most popular media forum. The researcher found in his study that how forum works, their layout and the placement of the usability elements and its content in the forum. The forum is designed to have easy usability and user interaction, has a retaining visual design and good contextual structure flow.

Survey Among The Media Student Usage of Online Tools For Learnin

Upon the 250 media students who come from various specializations, there were 95% of them who are using online tools for learning and knowledge enhancing and the rest 5% of them does not use any kind of online tools for their learning and knowledge enhancing purpose.

Online Learning Tools Used

Online tools are becoming a common term in the world of learning, the students among the online tool users for learning, 72% of the people use Online interactive forums (Discussion portals), 63% of the people use Blogs as their learning tool, 51% of the people use Web Based Training (WBT), 38% of them use wikis, 20% of them use podcasts and 7% of them use other types of online learning tools.

Awareness of Online Interactive Forums

Among the users who use online tools for learning the people who are aware about the online interactive forums are about 88% and there were about 12% of them who are not aware of the online interactive forums.
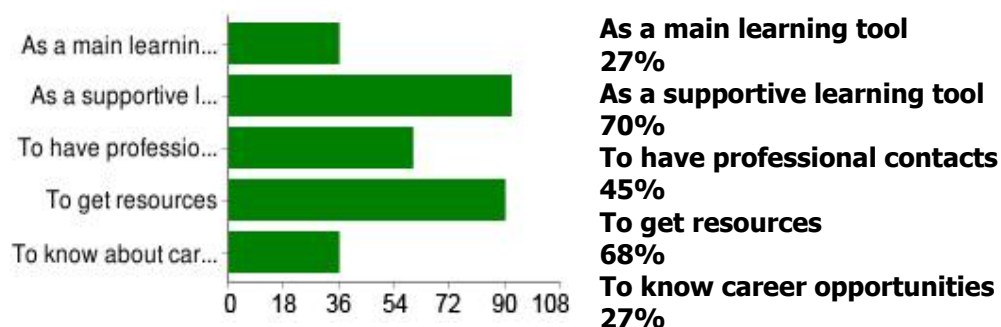
Involvement In Online Interactive Forums

The users who use online tools for learning among them who are involved in the online interactive forums for discussions are about 74% and the rest were about 26% of them who did not involved in any kind of the online interactive forums.

Forums Support Learning

The users who use online tools for learning among them who agree that Using the online interactive forums as a platform supports and enhances learning are about 82% and the rest were about 18% of them who did not agree that online forums supports learning.

Online Interactive Forums Usage

The usage of the online forums is categorized as a main learning tool, as a supportive learning tool, to have professional contacts, to get resources and to know career opportunities. About 27% the online forum users are using it as a main learning tool, 70% of the people uses as a supportive learning tool, 45% of the people use it for having professional contacts, 68% of the people use forums to get resources and 27% of them use in knowing about the career opportunities.

As a main learning tool
27%
As a supportive learning tool
70%
To have professional contacts
45%
To get resources
68%
To know career opportunities
27%

64

Online forum users who use for the learning purpose have various kind of learning content and clarification medium providing an effective learning experience about 90% of the users prefer textual explanations in discussion, 63% of the people prefer referral links in the discussion content, 70% of the people prefer Images for the effective learning in discussion content, 19% of them prefer audio with the content and 64% of them prefer video with the content for effective learning experience in online forums. The speed of the learning process in forums is ranked by the users of the online forums. Among 6% of the people have ranked the speed of learning in forums as Very fast paced, 41% of the people have ranked the speed as Fast paced learning, 48% of the people have ranked the speed as Moderate paced learning, only 3% of them have ranked the speed as slow pace and only 2% of them have ranked the speed as very slow paced of learning. An estimate of 42% of the participants involve in online forums using it as a portfolio submission platform and the remaining 58 % of them who does not use. The students of about 59 % of them uses online forums to know career options available in the industry other 49 % of them does not use for this purpose. Awareness levels of online forums are high and it provides a positive sign of growth in online learning.

In-depth Interview

The interview questions are based on the information on how the online forums are used as a learning tool and the ways to improve the usage among media students. Administrator of compositorsclub forum commended about forums as the forums are portal where members can come together and put their information, questions, voice and comments on a particular topic and learn. Forums as a learning tool in many ways such as they form a group and collaborative learning environment all over the world which in normal learning environment is difficult, the students from different college and universities and from abroad can collaborate themselves to share their knowledge in their learning process without meeting one another.

The credibility of the contents of forums is always governed by the moderators and admins that the contents in forums are fairly credible. He adds that forums has to be subscribed in many colleges and universities as the students get information easily and there is very high scope of students to know about the topic and learn. Adds that it is definitely a great learning tool and should be used with good consistency to get better result.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The forum is designed with good retaining color design which is pleasible to read. The forum design is with using lot of easy understandable icon display and description. The information available in forum homepage is presented well is organized in blocks for better readability. The forum has all the updation feeds subscription to the users. Forum also provides the information in a structure and the usability in the forum is as easy as any new users can learn the whole sitemap of the forum. Every page in the forum indicates the user where he is and helps in page navigation. The contextual segregation in the forum is good as the discussions are tracked down under each topic and also has better administration.From the survey there are 95% of them who are using online tools for learning and knowledge enhancing and the rest 5% of them does not use any kind of online tools for their learning and knowledge enhancing purpose. Among the users who use online tools for learning the people who are aware about the online interactive forums are about 88% and there were about 12% of them who are not aware of the online interactive forums.

Among these users who are involved and participated in the online interactive forums for discussions are about 74% and the rest 26% of them who did not involved in any kind of the online interactive forums. Among them who agree that using the online interactive forums as a platform supports and enhances learning are about 82% and the rest were about 18% of them who did not agree that online forums supports learning. Awareness level of online forums has increased dramatically and it provides a positive sign of growth in online learning.

The study found from the interviewee that, forums can be used to collaborate and discuss from different places and it is easy for the teachers to check them. Students use it for their educational purpose such has learning and sharing purposes. It was also found that the forums are effectively used by the students and it can be a best place to refer and learn that are related to various topics and focused topics where it scores higher percentage of authenticity and credibility. From the findings that there is quite higher percentage of forums used for online learning purposes by the media students. This implies that effectiveness and usage of forums a most popular online collaborative learning tool is high among the media students. Online forums have to be made more awareness among the students and the usefulness of it has to be spread by having demos in every institution. The forums has to be subscribed in many colleges and universities as the students would get information and there is very high scope of students to know about the topic, learn and collaborate with many students and professionals and it is definitely a great learning tool and should be used with good consistency to get better result.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHOR

Dr. S. ARULCHELVAN holds a doctoral degree in Media Sciences besides he has ten years of journalistic experience in the Tamil newspapers. He is handling Journalism, News Reporting, News Writing, Community Media, Development Communication, Educational Media, E-Learning, E-Content Creation, Research Methodology subjects for Post Graduate Students. He is guiding Ph.D. Research scholars in the area of Communication and Media Studies. Besides that he is enthusiastically involving in the university activities. He is coordinating the EDUSAT Terminal and Gyanvani Radio Station. He is published many research papers in national and international journals. He also presented and attended many national and international conferences. He had been invited as resource person for several workshops.

He has organized many workshops, seminars on the behalf of the Department of Media Sciences. He is connected with prominent Indian and foreign professional Associations.

Assistant Professor Dr. S. ARULCHELVAN
FCT Post Doctoral Research Fellow, Department of Communication & Arts,
Aveiro University, Portugal.
Phone: 351 913546415, Mobile: +919444819958
Email: arulchelvan@ua.pt or arulchelvansriram@gmail.com or achelvan@annauniv.edu

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