Abstract

The Fermilab LInC program is designed to create a network of educational leaders who effectively use technology to support engaged learning. Throughout LInC's two-year history as a course offered online (a shift from the program's traditional, face-to-face format), the LInC facilitators have developed better methods for encouraging engaged learning through online staff development. This year, research was done to gain a more complete — but still rudimentary — understanding of the issues associated with using the Internet as the primary means for communication and a method for accessing class materials. The research dealt specifically with strategies for conducting class sessions using IRC (Internet Relay Chat).

What is LInC?

LInC is the Fermilab Leadership Institute Integrating Internet, Instruction and Curriculum, a course devoted to teaching educators how to best use technology to support engaged learning.

Creating an engaged learning project which effectively uses technology

Every participant in the LInC course is required to develop a project which uses concepts of engaged learning and best use of technology learned in the class.

- 100% Recyclable

- I Want to be an American Citizen

Online Courses

Two years ago, Fermilab began offering the LInC course over the Internet to educators from around the country. For a large portion of the year I've been involved with technical matters, keeping various CGI scripts updated and developing tools for the administration of the web server. These have included:

Technical Projects

- HTML and CGI for Winter 1999 course application
- dirWalkSavePerms tool for AppleShare permissions management (AppleScript)
- fix_applescript tool for parsing of dirWalkSavePerm's output
- netmeeting2html conversion tool (Perl)
- ntep_rubric CGI (Perl — preliminary code)
- RTF-to-shtml conversion tool (Perl)

Moderation of Class Sessions

My research was focused primarily on the issues associated with the LInC Online course's use of chats over the Internet (IRC) in the stead of face-to-face class sessions. Over LInC's two years as an online course, a prodigious body of chat logs from each semester's chats has built up. Through analysis of these chats, I was able to gain a better idea of what a teacher of an online course (specifically of a course with engaged learning at its core) must do differently to maintain order and get things done.

Student perceptions of a class chat session differ wildly. While some students truly realize that the chat session is no different from a face-to-face class and treat it as such, other students have difficulty remembering this. After several weeks this gets better, but in many initial chats students will begin conversing on completely unrelated subjects in the middle of a chat (analogous to screaming across a crowded classroom about your cat), do not participate, or are not prepared.

Concerns

- Students often come in unprepared and consequently do not participate — the sense of intimidation when one is completely silent in a classroom does not exist.

- Students become unfocused more easily because they do not have the visual image of a teacher in the room to quell the urge to talk to other students.

- IRC does not lend itself well to moderated, serial discussion.

- Students in the LInC course have recently begun joining multiple chat rooms during breakout sessions, which is analogous to running back and forth between several classes at once. Since most students only pay attention to one room, instructors in the other rooms they have joined cannot tell whether they are not paying attention or whether they're just being unparticipatory.

Suggestions for Online Class Moderators

- Clearly define the goals for a class session at the beginning of the chat and tell who the moderator is, what the product of the chat should be, and what by what process that product should be arrived at.

- Make sure students encounter the same group of facilitators on a regular basis; just as in a face-to-face class, students dislike dealing with substitutes.

- The instructor should keep in mind concepts of engaged learning when moderating a chat; the moderator should be facilitating a discussion, not lecturing.

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