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CHC STUDENTS ONLINE: RESPONSES TO COURSE ORGANISATION

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Abstract: Previous research by the authors has shown that Confucian Heritage Students participating in online problem solving discussions show a high degree of message postings that are related to the organization of the course of study, rather than to its contents and intellectual challenges. The authors argue that this is consistent with the more broadly based research outcomes relating to the achieving strategy that is quite typically exhibited among CHC students. This interview based study explores the perceptions of CHC students as they engage with collaborative learning online, and shows that the concerns relate to matters to do with assessment, with the reliability and timeliness of group member inputs, and the possibilities of plagiarism

Keywords: Confucian Heritage Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

(CHC) students are predominantly strategic and pragmatic in their attitude towards learning (e.g., Biggs, 1990, 1992; Kember & Gow, 1990; Smith, Miller & Crassini, 1998). Biggs noted that students from CHC countries, where education systems place high emphasis on examinations, are particularly good at seeking cues that will assist them to pass with good grades, while Nakamura noted that Chinese think in ways that are strongly related to utilitarian goals. Further support for these findings was provided by Smith, Miller & Crassini (1998), when using the Approaches to Studying Inventory (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). They identified an 'Efficiency Orientation' factor for their sample of CHC students. The factor entails seeking out cues for possible exam questions, securing important references, and meeting the learning objectives set by the instructor. No similar factor was obtained for the Australian students who participated in that research. This form of learning approach that is strategic, pragmatic, and utilitarian corresponds closely to Biggs' (1987) construct of Achieving Strategy.

In a later study, Smith (2005) showed that CHC students scored higher than did Australian students on Achieving Strategy. Here again, CHC students typically adopted a pragmatic and strategic approach to learning, with a strong focus on the practical outcomes of success in learning. Using the Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs, 1987), CHC students reported themselves to be organised both in terms of time (e.g., submitting assignments on time) and on tasks (e.g., note-taking and assignments). Students also displayed

conscientiousness by expending consistent, regular efforts in studying and testing their understanding, as well as vigilance in seeking out suggested readings that go with the lectures. Specific and systematic procedures seem to characterize the Achieving Strategy that Chinese students identified themselves with. Smith noted that these characteristics were related to previous findings that CHC students see it as very important to succeed on all assessments, to compete with other students to achieve high outcomes and a good image among others. She also linked her findings with earlier findings (Smith & Smith, 1999) that CHC students are characterized by a high degree of fear of failure and of anxiousness about academic success. Smith (2005) concluded that motivation to achieve academic excellence together with their strategic and efficiency learning strategy can explain for CHC students being particularly concerned about assessment procedures and meeting the necessary expectations and requirements of the course.

In their comparative study of CHC and Australian university students learning in an online collaborative environment, Smith, Coldwell, Smith and Murphy (2005) were able to make observations consistent with those made by others in classroom environments, and reviewed earlier in this paper. Using Paulsen's (1995) classification of online postings into organisational, social and intellectual, Smith et al (2005) showed that CHC students posted a very much larger number of organisational messages to the discussion space than did the Australian students. Of all CHC postings to the online discussion, 44.6% were organisational, compared with 27.4% of postings by Australian students. The higher percentage of organisational postings by CHC students were at the expense of a lower percentage of intellectual postings – whereas social postings were about the same for the two groups.

In the organisational message components, both groups of students were typically asking questions about the organization and the requirements of the discussion, or expressing confusion about the process of the discussion, about the timelines for submission of discussion outcomes for assessment. CHC students tended to show more anxiousness than Australian students in making sure that they were doing what they were supposed to do to ensure that they contributed to the task resolution, and also showed more anxiousness that their contributions were received and noted by the facilitator, such that their assessment obligations were being met. These observations in an online environment are consistent with Baron's (1998) findings that Singaporean students' communications with their instructors were characterised by seeking clarity on assessment-related tasks and other requirements they would be expected to fulfil.

focus on a number of issues, with the first couple of weeks largely devoted to introductions and social interaction. In the first several weeks of these tutorials students discuss and evaluate an ethical dilemma in the context of a real-world scenario. Their first assignment, which is submitted as individual work, requires them to use the same process to evaluate a different scenario. Following that, students identify an issue of current importance in computer ethics, and submit that as their second individual assignment, together with their argument and evidence supporting their choice of topical issue. In the last five weeks of the semester students are placed into groups of around six.

Students have to collaborate in developing their response to one of the current problems in computer ethics that they identified in the second assignment. This final online problem solving discussion is monitored by tutorial staff, but those staff do not enter the discussion and the mediation role is played by students on a rotational basis. The task for each group of students here is to self-manage the discussion and problem solving to result in an assignment that is submitted by the group, and assessed as a group assignment. The semester-long sequence of online tutorials continues in parallel and in a different space.

3. METHOD

Six CHC students who had undertaken the third year baccalaureate level computer ethics unit were interviewed for this study. Interviews took place after the semester had finished. The interviews were semi-structured and developed around the themes of assessment, student group organization, the way in which interaction with lecturing staff had been organised, and the submission of assessment.

Participants were identified for the study by direct contact by email from one of the researchers, with an invitation to join, and a plain language statement that outlined the process. Only CHC students were approached to participate, their ethnicity being determined from student records. The first six agreeable respondents formed the study. Four of these were male, two were female; three were from Hong Kong, two from Singapore, and one from Malaysia. Five and a half hours of audio-interviews were generated for the study.

Interviews were conducted at a time suitable to the participant, and were audio-taped and later transcribed to text. The text analysis was carried out by working through the transcripts and identifying likely themes in each. As each subsequent transcript was worked through, themes became modified to finally yield a set that both researchers were satisfied reflected the interview data in a valid but parsimonious manner.

4. RESULTS

Five themes emerged from the data as being the central issues of course organization that concerned CHC students. These were:

- In this unit students worked together in groups to develop a group response to a problem. The group response was developed through online discussion. The concern here among CHC students was that getting the group together was not easy, and neither was the group reliable – hence, organising for discussion to even take place was not reliable.
- The unit required submission of group responses, forged through online discussion. CHC students saw significant barriers to timely submission through lack of reliability in getting the group together, lack of responsiveness on the part of some members, and differential commitment of responsiveness to the discussion.
- The online environment was not friendly towards student understanding of their individual assignment requirements, due to the limited capacity of the online environment to foster any sort of deep conversation with the lecturer on understanding the assessment task and its requirements.
- The online environment was also not friendly towards students receiving and being able to discuss feedback from their individual assignments in a way sufficient for their complete understanding.
- The last theme noted was concern among students that since the online environment necessitated the entering of text to the public discussion space, that the plagiarism of their work by other students, for the individual assignments, was easy and therefore reduced the fairness of their assessment.

We could provide readers with quotes directly from the interview transcripts that underpin these themes, but the page restriction for this paper precludes that. The conference presentation will, however, provide that direct data.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study are largely confirmatory of the broader literature. CHC students were anxious to ensure that they fulfilled the requirements of the course assessment. Successful completion of the group-based assessment required students to gain a clear

parts to reach the same level of comfort with the assessment tasks, or that the level of comfort they needed to achieve was greater. Other research reviewed here has consistently shown a higher degree of anxiousness among CHC students for clear understanding of requirements. Our suggestion is that this greater anxiousness would most likely translate into higher levels of clarity being sought.

Similarly, CHC students appeared to find the online environment a more difficult one through which to achieve an understanding of the assessment of their work as it was returned to them by the assessor, and in gathering useful meaning from the feedback provided on the assignment. It is suggested here that these matters are most likely very similar to the assignment clarity issues discussed above. It is likely that gaining clarity about the assessment outcome and the feedback provided takes more messaging for the more assessment-concerned CHC students. Additionally, it is likely that a greater level of clarity is being sought.

It was clear from the interview transcripts that CHC students would have preferred face to face discussion with their lecturer on assessment requirements and assessment feedback, and that they were dissatisfied with the online medium for achieving quality understandings of these important matters. It was clear from the data and the themes drawn above from the data that CHC students felt inadequately prepared for their involvement in CMC. Murphy and Cifuentes (2001) have drawn attention to a number of necessary preparations, including developing group equitability, collaborative strategies, time management, developing structure to the online discussion and so on. The students in our study have lamented the absence or comparative dysfunction of those features of good CMC.

A particularly interesting finding in the current study, and one that was not expected on the basis of previous reported research, is that the CHC students were concerned that their work could be used by other students participating in the online discussion. There are several issues here. First, there was no evidence CHC students felt that other CHC students would plagiarise their work any more than Australian students might; nor was there any evidence for the converse of that. That is an important observation to make since in the Smith et al (2005) quantitative component of this research, it was clear that Australian students contributed considerably more intellectual postings than did the CHC students, and those postings were longer. In other words, there was greater opportunity for the CHC students to plagiarise. We have not interviewed Australian students in this study, so we can't comment on whether there were any similar feelings of possible plagiarism. Additionally, the students interviewed were conscious of the fact that once they

had put their posting into the online space, it was there in perpetuity for any other student to use. The concern here was not that the content of the posting might be used in the online discussion, but that it could be plagiarised and used by a student in their individual assignment such that the originator of the posting and the idea would never know. Of further concern here was that, in the assessment of their work, the assessor wouldn't know which student had originated the idea and which had plagiarised it and, accordingly, an assessment outcome could be negatively and unfairly impacted. In fact, we found no evidence of this form of plagiarism at all in our analysis of postings (although we didn't analyse individual assignments), so there is no evidence on whether this fear is a real one or only imagined.

There are several implications that can be drawn from this study. First, the organization of the group work and the methods used to ensure equitable and reliable input to the discussion clearly need some attention. That can most likely be achieved by much greater involvement by the instructor, and more clear quantitatively expressed expectations on participation and its regularity. Second, there is a clear need to ensure that CHC students are provided with as much opportunity to discuss assessment requirements with their instructors on a face to face basis. Clearly, the online medium had not been satisfactory to them, at least on this occasion. It's important to note here that a course on ethics in computers may provide for more complex, less algorithmic, understandings of the subject matter and the issues that relate to ethics, such that this course may have been one of the more difficult to engage students with entirely online. Finally, the concern that students had of plagiarism is one that needs to be taken seriously as an academic and administrative matter, and instructors and assessors sensitised to the possibility, and the extent to which it worries students.

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