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ABSTRACT

Psychology and computer science were clustered into a course in "Internet Psychology" with the goal of enabling students to use electronic networks responsibly and creatively and to understand the principles of psychology as they operate in the electronic context. Fourteen students from a variety of majors registered for the class. Course content, process, and outcomes are described. Electronic means of communication between professor and student, as well as student to student, were emphasized. A broad range of class projects took advantage of the networks and included constructing a home page. First-hand experience in using group dynamics was important to improving the students' ability to work together in teams. Students elected to take harder tests in teams and did well. Follow-up assessment showed that students have become "local experts" on the Internet. Their Internet Psychology course provided them with an understanding of behavior that serves them well as they teach others. (EMK)

Intro through Internet Psychology[1]

Abstract

Sandra K. Webster and Thomas P. Kelliher

This poster will report on a pilot Internet Psychology course. The new course was offered as part of a cluster with the Internet Computer Science course. It was designed so that it could fulfill students' general education requirements in social science and serve the prerequisite function of Introductory Psychology. Internet Psychology covered core Introductory Psychology concepts as they related to humans in communication via electronic networks. The course process utilized teamwork, electronic communication and applications of psychology concepts to Internet projects. Students appreciated learning and applying psychology concepts in the context of the Internet.

[1] The pilot cluster, Social and Electric Networks on the Internet, was offered during the spring of 1997 as part of Westminster College's new liberal studies curriculum. Partial support was provided by the National Science Foundation's Division of Undergraduate Education through grant DUE#9651206.

Intro through Internet Psychology[1]

Human social interaction increasingly occurs in the context of electronic networks and the system of machines also interacts with the social system of the humans who use them. The goal of clustering psychology and computer science was to enable students to responsibly and creatively use electronic networks and understand the principles of psychology as they operate in this context. Student objectives for the psychology portion of the cluster were to a) understand how human factors influence the design of electronic communication, b) apply principles of interpersonal communication to electronic communications and c) extend the research on group dynamics to Internet phenomena.

Students

Class size was projected for 24, with 8 psychology students, 8 computer science students and 8 students from other disciplines. Only 14 students registered for the class because it fit no existing requirements for graduation; and scheduling two adjacent courses was difficult for most students. There were 2 computer science majors, 1 psychology major and the rest were from a variety of majors. The pilot included 1 senior, 2 juniors, 3 sophomores and 8 first year students. The class afforded individually tailored course outcomes and tools for each student. An initial attitude survey showed that most students were anxious about psychology, computer science or both.

Course Content

The core concepts of introductory psychology were identified and integrated into the context of Internet Psychology, including the following major topics:

- Human machine interaction
- Problem solving and algorithms
- Dyadic interactions on the Net
- Perceptual sets
- Distributed group dynamics
- Cognitive processes in problem solving
- Internet communications
- Social anonymity and role playing
- Teamwork
- Security, privacy, and ethics
- Person perception

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- Group cohesion
- Moral issues of Cyberspace
- Making friends in Cyberspace
- Small group communication
- Self-help groups on the Internet
- Group think
- Social information processing
- The reluctant team member
- Electronic communities
- Status in hierarchies - international connections
- Self in cyber-society

During the semester two external events served to highlight the connection between psychology and the Internet. They were the chess match between Big Blue and Gary Kasparov and the Heaven's Gate tragedy. The course syllabus was rearranged so that conformity, compliance and cults were covered immediately following the Heaven's Gate tragedy. The Kasparov vs. Big Blue match coincided with the course focus on cognition and cognitive development.

Course Process

Because the course focused on electronic communication in a networked society, electronic means of communication between professor and student, as well as student to student were emphasized. The class syllabus was available through the class web site. Texts were Internet links. Class notes were presented via Netscape, PowerPoint, or as text files in shared network directories. Assessment was done through quizzes, essay tests, team projects and assignments. On-line assignments were electronically "marked" and returned to the students via e-mail.

Class projects took advantage of the networks and ranged from an experiment to test the efficacy of emoticons in increase e-mail response to team projects using the Internet. An intermediate assignment was to construct a personal home page using the principles of perception that had been covered in class. The page also illustrated three examples of visual illusions

Small group dynamics were the big surprise in this course. Students did not know how to work together in teams. A lecture on group dynamics, readings and short-term team assignments allowed students to learn how to work together well. Early in the process two members of a three person team had responded to a quiz that the best strategy for effective teamwork was diffusion of responsibility. They had indeed been diffusing their responsibility. A discussion with the team and the requirement to copy professor all team e-mail helped move them to a better understanding. Term projects were completed in interdisciplinary teams and presented on the class web site

As the term progressed the students became very good at team work. So much so, that when given the opportunity to do an individual quiz or work on a harder team quiz they elected to form two 7-person teams to complete the quiz. This quiz led us to propose a team final. The joint covered both student understanding of Internet psychology and computer science. The tasks they were given included:

- A User-friendly Tutorial of "Geek Speak"
- A Guide to Ethical Use of the Internet in Advertising
- A Tutorial on Small Group Dynamics on the Internet
- A Guide to Creative Problem Solving Using the Internet

Course Outcomes

The student course products-- their assignments, team projects and finals stand as the major assessment tool. Students were able to demonstrate an understanding of the principles of psychology through these products. In addition, an assessment of their critical thinking skills was done using the Watson-Glaser critical thinking inventory. It demonstrated that our students' critical thinking abilities were typical for undergraduates. Half the class (mostly first year students) scored below the median for college students. The range in the class was from the 5^{th} percentile to the 99^{th}.

Student course evaluations and attitude assessments were very positive. One student comment summarizes a general feeling from the class. She wrote, "As for the psychology part of the course-- I really enjoyed the concepts & readings as they applied to the Internet....Many issues were covered that are extremely & increasingly important in the technologically advanced world. Issues such as transference, group decision making processes as they apply to this technology (we even got to witness an event that proves this issue's importance -- Heaven's Gate), and even Cyber Psychologists. ... Most importantly, I've learned that there are correlation's between two fields that may appear to be unrelated."

Follow-up assessment is possible since most of the students are still enrolled at the college. They have become the "local experts" on the Internet. Their Internet Psychology course has provided them with an understanding of behavior that serves them well as they are paid to teach other students and faculty about the Internet.

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