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Use of a CSCW Platform in Reunion Island University

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Abstract: We study the traces left by various groups of students on a CSCW platform at Reunion Island University. By observing the functionalities used and the size of the groups we note that, most of the time, the platform is not used for collaborative work. Furthermore, according to the academic programs, use can be very different from one program to the other. At the time the MOOCs are developing, those results could pose problem.

Keywords: CSCW, higher education disciplines, MOOC, trace analysis.

Introduction

The Reunion Island University is a small university in the Indian Ocean. It hosts more or less 12,000 students per year. It uses essentially two distance learning devices: Moodle for eLearning and a Computer Supported Collaborative Work (CSCW) platform, called "Bureau Virtuel" ("BV") which is used only in five universities in France. For the moment, Moodle is used effectively for two goals: courses uploading and exams; BV is used for sharing. So we looked more closely at the BV. We wanted to know if this sharing has consisted in collaborative work. For this, we have studied traces left by students on it. First, we will see that we confirm the results of other researchers (Bruillard & Baron, 2009) about collaborative work in French higher education: we are, for now, still very far from what is called collaboration. Then, we will see that, according to academic programs and levels, the use of the platform can be very different. This has not been showed yet in other researches, as far we know.

Methodology

In Reunion Island University, disciplines are gathered together in what is called "components" or "faculties". Here, we analyze the traces left by students on the CSCW platform distinguishing three components of a same campus (6407 students): "Law and Economics" (abbreviated "LE"; 2581 students); "Literature and Humanities" ("LH"; 2493); "Science and Technology", ("ST"; 1333). We also look at the different levels (year of training): Licence/Bachelor's degree (3 years : L1, L2, L3), Master (2 years : M1, M2) and PhD because from one level to another there can be very large differences as will be seen.

The "Bureau virtuel" is a CSCW platform which allows to create groups on it and to share in these groups: folders, documents, URL, contacts, calendars, forums... Each year there is a students' training to the main functionalities of the platform so they know how to use it. As we study collaborative work, we were interested to the different groups formed on the platform and, for each group, to the traces it had left (Simon, 2009). There were 646 groups: LE 184 groups gathering all together 80% of their students, LH 203 groups, 30%, and ST 259 groups, 86%.

The traces to which we had access were completely anonymized. Data we got have been related to the component to which the group belonged and to the level of study (licence, master, PhD).

Results and discussion

The platform of Reunion Island University is rarely used for collaborative work. This appears through the main features used. Some tools that can be used for collaboration or cooperation are very little used whatever the component. Thus, "notes" and "tasks" that allow planning joint work are not exploited. URL deposits are also rarely used (0.7 URL per group). Similarly, while the forums are also considered very popular tools for students, they are rarely used (only 1.4 message per group). The use of the diary or calendar seems not uniformly spread across all groups only 29 have performed 95 or more events. Ultimately, the only feature used by all groups is the documents deposit. However, the groups from the LH component have fewer documents, in average, than those from DE or ST (20 in LH vs. 35 in DE and 36 in ST). *We can see also that the work is not collaborative through group sizes:* most of the groups have a size greater than 20 members (from 51 on average in L1 to 3 in PhD). Thus, this platform is mainly used to pool or disseminate documents. It is only in the higher levels (especially PhD) that groups have characteristics consistent with those of collaborative work. This result on the low use of the platform, confirms those of others researchers (Bruillard & Baron, 2009).

More interesting is the relationship between this use and academic programs. Depending on the discipline, all students do not use the BV systematically. While 86% of students of Science and Technology disciplines or 80% of Law and Economics had to use it, only 30% of students of Literature and Humanities have practiced it. These disparities change when we look more closely at a possible CSCW use: 10% in ST vs 5% in DE and LH. So, if more students in DE use the CSCW platform than in LE (80% vs 30%) they don't use it more for collaborative work. It seems that it is in ST that the use is more for collaboration. Maybe, this is to be compared with what Endrizzi (2010) says: in French universities, it is paid more attention in science and technology, than in others disciplines, to the internal organization and educational coherence of the course. Anyway, here we find this extreme heterogeneity between disciplines that Rey (Rey, 2005) has observed in the training plans of the different curricula in French higher education.

This is problematic when it is considered that the Ministry plans that teaching in higher education relies more and more on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). MOOCs are based on various forms of collaboration (Blom & al, 2013). Thus we may wonder if the students, at least those of the Reunion Island University, will be prepared to face. Their only use of social networks should not be sufficient because it has been shown that digital natives do not necessarily have sufficient mastery of the tools they handle (Baron & Bruillard 2008). They must therefore be trained and not only the students of Sciences and Technology or Law and Economics but also and particularly those of Literature and Humanities. We insist on this point because students of Literature and Humanities come from more socially disadvantaged environment than those in Law and Economics, or Science and Technology (Rey, 2005). So we see that those students accumulate disabilities. In one way, that confirms the relationship between the "digital divide" and the "social divide" (Van Dijk, 2006).

This study doesn't give any explanation to those results. Getting these explanations will be the work of the "Digital Observatory" that the University has established. We conducted interviews with a teacher of each component to have a beginning of answer. It appears that, most of the time, they use the tools, not for teaching better, but because they cannot do otherwise. For example, the document uploading is used by all components because the budget for photocopies decreased. Another example, in Law and Economics, they use Moodle because it allows exams for large cohorts of students and it marks them automatically. However, as we can see, this is less pedagogical reasons than economic reasons. Thus we have to go further in the study. This is the reason why the "Digital Observatory" has launched a big investigation among students and teachers. The results of this investigation should permit to answer to the questions why the platform is so little used for collaborative work, why the components don't seem to use it in the same way and what we have to do to change this trend.

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