

Project Title : Beyond the E-portfolio: Connectivity and Communities of Learning in a Virtual Environment

Leading University : The University of Hong Kong

Participating UGC-funded University(ies) : The Education University of Hong Kong

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Summary of Proposal

With the emphasis of tertiary education shifting beyond the physical boundaries of the university, it is important to have a means for students to feel connected when they are geographically distant and to connect with their disparate learning experiences in order to make meaning of these experiences beyond individual, solitary reflection. The aim of this three-year, cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional project is to stimulate students to form virtual communities of learning supported by a faculty mentor to explore more deeply how their individual learning experiences affect their development as university students and as human beings. To achieve this, we will create a virtual learning environment, or working e-portfolio, that becomes a tool for mobile communication, social learning and collaboration, in which students coalesce into communities of learning motivated by the challenge of an inquiry-based approach. This will serve the dual purpose of enhancing student learning while also providing psychosocial support when they are physically not present in the classroom. The higher education sector as a whole will share the benefits of having a learning framework and an e-learning tool which work synergistically to encourage conversation, build social and electronic connectivity and puts the collective learning power of a community at its core.

Summary of Final Report

With the emphasis of tertiary education shifting beyond the physical boundaries of the university, it is important to have a means for students to feel connected when they are geographically distant and to connect with their disparate learning experiences in order to make meaning of these experiences beyond individual, solitary reflection. This three-

year, cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional project called “connect*ed” aimed to stimulate students to form virtual communities of learning supported by a faculty mentor to explore more deeply how their individual learning experiences affected their development as university students and as human beings.

Undergraduate medical students and education students engaging in off-campus experiential learning were connected to each other and to a faculty mentor in a virtual learning space to learn, to share, and to feel safe. They used an inquiry-based learning framework structured around institutional aims and graduate outcomes to consider questions related to critical self-reflection, ethical decision-making, and leadership as part of the process of personal growth. They shared and discussed their experiences and ideas with peers and faculty mentors and documented their evolution and progress over time, all in the virtual learning space.

This project showed that the content and format of the inquiry-based framework could be customized to suit the needs of students and different curricula while maintaining the core features that allows students to demonstrate meaningful reflection and learning. It also showed that through “connect*ed”, students improved their critical inquiry, communication and motivation to learn. They also engaged in collaborative interactions and formed different types of social networks that were conducive to learning. Students indicated that peers and their faculty mentor were a needed and accessible source for support when faced with academic, logistical or personal anxieties.

Project “connect*ed” served the dual purpose of enhancing student learning while also providing psychosocial support when they are physically not present in the classroom. Going forward, the higher education sector as a whole can share the benefits of having a learning framework and virtual learning space that works synergistically to encourage conversation, build social and electronic connectivity and puts the collective learning power of a community at its core.