Evaluate the Effectiveness of Using Blogs to Support the Tutorial Process among High School AVID Students

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Abstract: Online blogs or forums may create an asynchronous learning environment during a tutorial process. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a college preparatory program to assist those who are in the middle level and want the extra support to perform well in school and attend a four-year college. AVID students are required to participate in tutorials by asking higher-level questions. Many questions during the face-to-face sessions are math questions, which leads to lack of help in other core subjects. In this paper students performed two online tutorial sessions by using Ning. Students were required to provide two thoughtful responses to their classmates post. After implementation students determined whether the online tutorial session is effective compared to the face-to-face tutorial sessions in a written reflection. The results of the reflection indicated that students and tutors thought the online process was effective with limitations. The results of the reflection and issues are thoroughly discussed in this paper.

Introduction

The purpose of this action research project is to evaluate the effectiveness of using blogs to support the tutorial process among high school AVID students. AVID is a college preparatory program to assist those who are in the middle level and want the extra support to perform well in school and attend a four year college. One of the pillars of AVID is weekly tutorial sessions. In these sessions students create higher level questions and discover the process of finding the answer. AVID tutors who are trained run these sessions in the tutorial process. I created a forum using Ning network to facilitate the tutorial sessions. The reason for the online forum is to allow students to receive help outside of the face-to-face tutorial sessions. Many students create math questions for the face-to-face tutorial sessions, yet they need assistance in other core subjects. The online forum allows students to post non-math questions and receive assistance that is needed in other core subjects.

"Being situated within the Internet allows bloggers to access their blogs anywhere and anytime an Internet connection is available, an opportunity for learning to continue outside the classroom" (Huffaker, 2005). Blogs allow students to receive assistance from each other after school hours, where daily assessment takes place. "Collaborative

activities might improve some distance learners' social integration process and possibly sustain their motivation, which would lead to higher involvement in coursework, and, ultimately, to persistence" (Poellhuber, Chomienne, and Karsenti, 2008). Many students in this study lack motivation, this online tutorial process could lead them to be motivated in their courses.

Action Research Methodology

As a master's degree student the researcher conducted an action research project in the AVID class at the school that he teaches at. The study was conducted in the action researcher's classroom as part of the normal education practice. The study was conducted starting on January 31, 2011 and ending on February 11, 2011. To examine the effectiveness of the online tutorial session students wrote a reflection at the end of the study. In this study Ning Forums was used to host the online tutorial sessions. As an action research project, qualitative data collection methods were used and student names will be eliminated to help keep the anonymity of student identities.

The high school is in its third year of implementing the AVID elective class. The AVID elective class is made up of 18 students who have the determination to succeed but lack study and organizational skills. The researcher created a blog using Ning where students were able to post questions and receive feedback from their classmates. Their participation in the blog was a part of their grade. Students were instructed not to share answers but post questions to facilitate the process of finding the answer.

Procedure

During the first week of implementation students created a Gmail account that was used for email as well as accessing Google documents for sharing their tutorial request form. The tutorial request form is a document where students write their questions and teachers sign off, giving permission to the student that the question(s) pertains to current class material. Students were required to develop two higher-level non-math questions that could be used during the online tutorial process. Students created a Ning account and the first tutorial session was held synchronously in class. The second tutorial session was held asynchronously. During the implementation period students posted questions and responded to two of their group members by providing guiding questions and links to discover the answer. I facilitated the Ning discussion to ensure the appropriateness of the posted content. At the end of the implementation period students wrote a reflection on the tutorial process. They were prompted to reflect on the process of the online tutorial session vs. the face-to-face tutorial sessions.

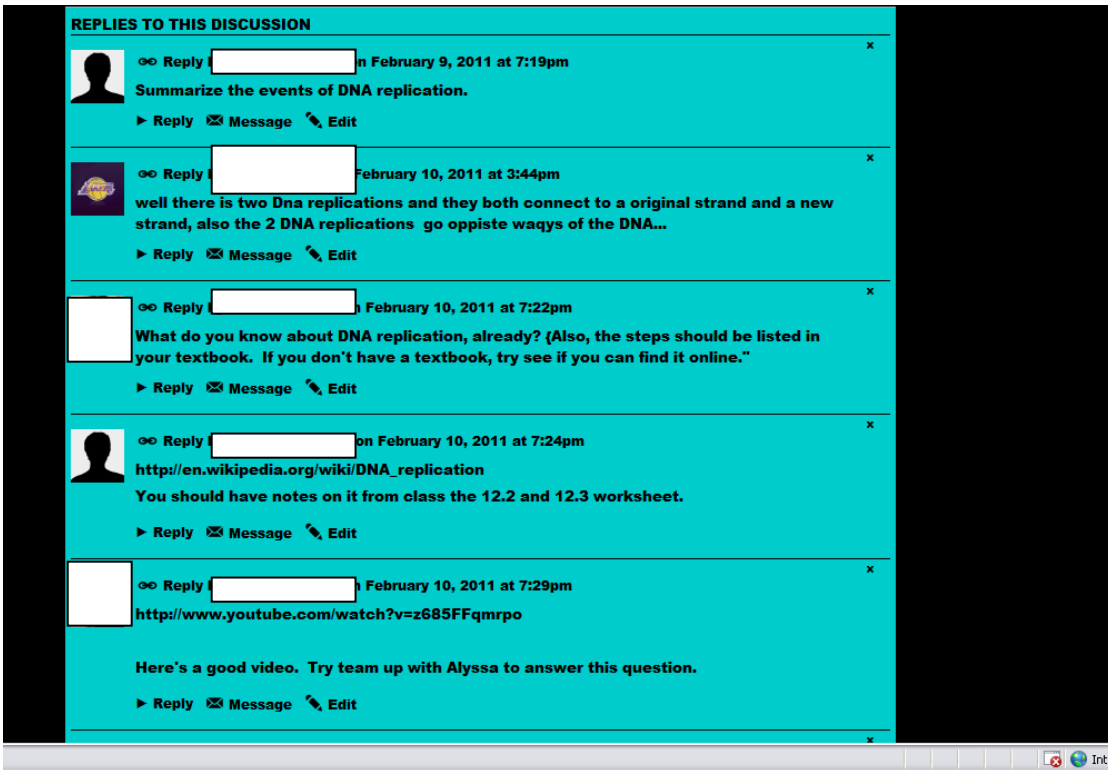

Figure 1. Example of the online tutorial session using Ning. Students responded with both text, links to resources, and a video using you tube.

Results

Students and tutors wrote a one page reflection on the effectiveness of the online tutorial sessions. Upon reading the reflections many students and tutors explained the effective and ineffective parts of the online tutorial session. Sixteen out of twenty-one students and tutors thought the online tutorial session was effective. However five out of the twenty-one students thought the process was ineffective.

Effective

The Internet allowed students to access information at the tip of their fingers. Many of the students and tutors thought the online tutorial process was effective due to the amount of resources they could access on the web. One of the tutors wrote, “It exposes each student to the outstanding resource of the Internet, and allows them to find resources that match the students learning preferences better (videos, readings, interactive work, audio recording, etc.).” Many of the students posted links that gave a description and explanation of the posted question.

“The benefits from the online process were that I got more then one answer so I could really explore the topic.” wrote an AVID student. The information provided to answer the question came from multiple online resources. Students read through different resources and understood the answer from multiple perspectives. The tutors agree as one said,

"They learn to approach a question with numerous points of view, which help them to understand the problem more completely and find a more complete answer."
The students that participated less in the face-to-face were the ones who posted the most responses during the online tutorial session. As one student said, "Another way it's useful is because you don't have people watching over you doing the work, like breathing over your shoulder, so you won't get nervous or uncomfortable. Another student added, "The online process is a lot more comforting than the face-to-face sessions." In the online process some students felt they could provide information and contribute to the group by not being scrutinized by their peers. One tutor felt students were comfortable because the Ning discussions were similar to Facebook, a popular social network.

As technology is integrated into the educational curriculum it's important to use software that students are comfortable with. One of the tutors wrote, "Having AVID tutorials online provides a modern twist to tutoring for a generation that evolves with technological development." Today students have grown up with computers and the Internet. Students are comfortable using these learning tools that if used correctly and effectively could support the learning process.

Ineffective

One of the ineffective parts of the online tutorial process was a student who preferred the face-to-face tutorial session**.** One student said," Face-to-face is more effective because you can be shown the process and tutors can explain it in better detail." Another student added," I like the face-to-face tutorial because the response is immediate." The immediate feedback given during the face-to-face tutorial provides a better learning time frame than the online tutorial process. Students were able to receive the help that is needed and do not depend on other students to post their responses online. "The downside of the online tutorial is that it requires the students to constantly check the Ning network, where as the face-to-face tutorials happen on a scheduled basis," wrote a student. Having a two day period where students were to respond to their group members didn't seem as adequate as the information given during the face-to-face tutorials.

Math is a subject where majority of students need assistance in. Majority of the questions during the face-to-face tutorial sessions are math questions. A student said. "I need the most help in math and it's difficult to do the math online because we can't use the symbols needed to find the answer." Math is a difficult subject to find solutions for in a discussion based forum in Ning.

Implications or Discussion

Majority of the students thought the online tutorial process was effective compared to the face-to-face sessions. However there are some implications that could be solved with further implementation and future research. One question to ponder is how math can be integrated into a forum based discussion? A tutor wrote, "Online math questions would allow the student an opportunity to approach a math problem solving with a different technique, verbally (as opposed to analytically or graphically)."

The other implication is the transition from face-to-face to an online tutorial session. Currently students are not used to discussing academic problems online because it's something that they never practiced prior to this project. Could regular practice with the online discussion lead to an effective online tutorial? As students become comfortable with the online process, would it motivate them to develop their own problem solving skills? In the words of a tutor, "Either the student will step up and do extra research, developing their problem solving skills, or they will maintain a limited level of participation, and ultimately get little from the tutorial process."

Conclusion

The online tutorial process can be effective compared to the face-to-face tutorial process. Majority of the students thought the process allowed them to provide accessibility to more resources. The resources provided multiple perspectives to obtain an answer. The online format allowed students to contribute to the process without being scrutinized and use a learning tool that they are familiar with, the Internet. Though some prefer the face-to-face tutorial session there needs to be a format to include math into the process. Future studies related to this topic could make the online tutorial process effective compared to the face-to-face sessions.

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