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Improving the interfaces of online discussion forums to enhance learning support

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Abstract

This thesis describes a research work aimed at improving the interfaces of online discussion forums (ODFs) in relation to their functional support to enhance learning. These ODFs form part of almost all Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as WebCT, Moodle and Blackboard, which are widely used in education nowadays. Although ODFs are identified as valuable sources to learning, their interfaces are limited in terms of providing support to students, such as in the areas of managing their postings as well as in facilitating them to quickly locate and obtain specified information. In addition, these systems lack features to support inter-institutional cooperation that could potentially increase knowledge sharing between students and educators of different institutions. The interface design objective of this study therefore was to explore and overcome the limitations identified as above, and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of ODFs' support to learning. Using a task centered design approach; the required features were developed, and implemented in a working prototype called eQuake (electronic Question answer knowledge environment). eQuake is a shared online discussion forum system developed as an add-on to a well-known open source e-learning platform (Moodle). This system was intended for use among inter-institutional students in New Zealand tertiary institutions that teach similar courses. The improved interface functionalities of eQuake are expected to enhance learning support in terms of widening communication among users, increasing knowledge base, providing existing matching answer(s) quickly to students, and exposing students to multiple perspectives. This study considers such improvements to ODF interfaces as vital to enable users to enjoy the benefits of technology-mediated environment. The perceived usefulness and ease-of-use of improved features in eQuake were evaluated using a quantitative experimental research method. The evaluation was conducted at three tertiary institutions in New Zealand, and the overall results indicated positive response, although some suggestions for improvement have been made in the evaluation. This thesis presents a review of the related literature, describes the design and development of a user interface, followed by its implementation in eQuake, and a description of the evaluation. The thesis concludes with recommendations for better interface design of ODFs and provides suggestions for future research in this area.

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ABSTRACT	I
LIST OF FIGURES	VII
LIST OF TABLES	IX
LIST OF CHARTS	IX
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 BACKGROUND	1
1.2.1 ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS (ODFs)	4
1.3 RESEARCH PURPOSE	6
1.3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS	6
1.4 STUDY METHOD	7
1.5 STUDY CONTEXT	8
1.5.1 AIMS OF EQUAKE PROJECT	8
1.6 PROJECT TEAM	8
1.7 SCOPE OF THE THESIS	9
1.8 POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ENHANCED INTERFACE	9
1.9 EVALUATION	10
1.10 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS	10
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
2.1 INTRODUCTION	11
2.2 PERCEPTION OF LEARNING IN TERTIARY EDUCATION	12
2.2.1 INTERACTION AMONG STUDENTS AS KEY FACTOR TO EFFECTIVE LEARNING	13
2.2.2 STUDENTS EXPOSURE TO MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES	13
2.2.3 INTERACTIVITY DIMENSIONS IN RELATION TO LEARNING	14
2.3 COMPUTER SUPPORTED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING (CSCL)	16

2.3.1 ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS (ODFs) IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT	17
2.3.2 ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS (ODFs) AS LEARNING TOOLS	18
2.3.3 ODF INTERFACE SUPPORT FUNCTIONS	20
2.3.4 DISPLAY OPTIONS TO VISUALISE DISCUSSION	21
2.4 LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING ODFs' INTERFACE SUPPORT -----	22
2.4.1 DELAY IN RESPONSE TO STUDENTS' QUESTIONS	23
2.4.2 CONCEALED KNOWLEDGE	23
2.4.3 IDENTIFYING EXISTING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS	23
2.4.4 FOLLOWING DISCUSSION CONTEXT	24
2.5 RECENT RESEARCH -----	26
2.5.1 IDENTIFICATION OF THE CONTEXT OF DISCUSSION	27
2.5.2 IDENTIFICATION OF THE CONTRIBUTION TYPE	28
2.5.3 FACILITATION OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS	30
2.5.4 IMPROVEMENTS IN THE RE-USE OF INFORMATION	30
2.5.5 QUESTION-ANSWERING (QA) SYSTEMS	31
2.5.6 ODFs AS QA PLATFORMS	31
2.5.7 SYSTEMS ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF SPECIFIC STUDENT GROUPS	34
2.6 SUMMARY -----	35
CHAPTER 3: INTERFACE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT -----	38
3.1 INTRODUCTION -----	38
3.1.1 USER-INTERFACE AS PERCEIVED IN HUMAN COMPUTER INTERACTION (HCI)	39
3.1.2 DESIGNING USABLE AND EASY TO USE INTERFACES	39
3.1.3 FLEXIBLE INTERFACE DESIGN FRAMEWORK	39
3.2 USER INTERFACE DESIGN METHOD -----	40
3.2.1 GATHERING INTERFACE DESIGN FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS	41
3.2.2 USE CASES DESCRIBING USER REQUIREMENTS	43
3.2.3 USE CASE DIAGRAM SHOWING USERS AND PROCESSES INVOLVED	46
3.2.4 INTEGRATION OF INTERFACE IN EQUAKE AND TESTING	49
3.3 RATIONALE FOR USING MOODLE PLATFORM-----	50
3.4 SUMMARY -----	51

CHAPTER 4: IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERFACE IMPROVEMENTS -----	52
4.1 INTRODUCTION -----	52
4.2 MULTIPLE INSTITUTIONS USER ACCESS -----	52
4.3 CUSTOMISED INTERFACE FOR EDUCATORS -----	54
4.4 CUSTOMISED INTERFACE FOR STUDENTS -----	56
4.5 COMPOSING MESSAGES BY TYPE -----	57
4.6 ENHANCED THREADED DISCUSSION APPEARANCE -----	60
4.7 NOTIFYING STUDENTS OF ANSWERS -----	61
4.8 RATING QUALITY ANSWERS -----	62
4.9 FINDING EXISTING ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS -----	63
4.10 SUMMARY -----	65
CHAPTER 5: EVALUATION -----	67
5.1 INTRODUCTION -----	67
5.2 PURPOSE OF EVALUATION -----	67
5.3 PARTICIPANTS PROFILE -----	67
5.4 METHODOLOGY -----	67
5.5 SURVEY INSTRUMENT USED -----	68
5.5.1 RATIONALE FOR USING TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL (TAM)	68
5.5.2 HYPOTHESES	69
5.5.3 PROCEDURE	70
5.6 DATA ANALYSIS -----	70
5.6.1 ANALYSIS OF THE SYSTEM TRACKED INTERACTIONS	70
5.6.2 ANALYSIS OF THE SURVEY DATA	72
5.7 DISCUSSION ON EVALUATION OF THE SYSTEM -----	76
5.8 EVALUATION BY EDUCATORS -----	77
5.8.1 INSTRUMENT USED IN THE SURVEY	78

5.9 RESULTS -----	78
5.10 LIMITATIONS OF EVALUATION -----	81
5.11 SUMMARY -----	81
CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND FUTURE RESEARCH -----	83
6.1 INTRODUCTION -----	83
6.2 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY -----	83
6.2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THE STUDY	84
6.2.2 CONCLUSION	86
6.3 FUTURE RESEARCH -----	87
REFERENCE LIST -----	90
APPENDIX A: EQUAKE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR USERS -----	102
APPENDIX B: EQUAKE EVALUATION QUESTIONNAIRE FOR STAFF -----	105

List of Figures

FIGURE 2.1: C4P FRAME, ADOPTED FROM HOADLEY AND KILNER (2005, P.34).....	14
FIGURE 3 1: USE CASE DIAGRAM IDENTIFYING ELEMENTS AND PROCESSES.....	47
FIGURE 3.2: PROTOTYPE TESTING.....	49
FIGURE 3.3 SYSTEM TESTING AND IMPROVEMENT CYCLE.....	50
FIGURE 4.1(A) EXISTING ODFs' INTERFACES.....	52
FIGURE 4.1 (B): BROADENED INTERFACE STRUCTURAL DESIGN.....	53
FIGURE 4.2 (A): FORUM ACCESS VIA MASSEY UNIVERSITY'S LMS (WEBCT)	54
FIGURE 4.2 (B): FORUM ACCESS VIA EIT'S LMS (MOODLE)	54
FIGURE 4.3: CUSTOMISED INTERFACE FOR EDUCATORS.....	55
FIGURE 4.4: CUSTOMISED INTERFACE FOR STUDENTS	56
FIGURE 4.5: OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS TO SELECT THE MESSAGE TYPE.....	57
FIGURE 4. 6: OPTIONS FOR EDUCATORS TO SELECT THE TYPE OF REPLY	58
FIGURE 4.7: OPTION FOR EDUCATORS TO LINK TO FAQ.....	58
FIGURE 4.8: OPTION FOR EDUCATORS TO CREATE FAQ	59
FIGURE 4.9: MESSAGE MARKED AS SEEN	60
FIGURE 4.10: ILLUSTRATION OF THREADED DISCUSSION STRUCTURE.....	60
FIGURE 4.11: SUBSCRIPTION FACILITIES.....	62
FIGURE 4.12: RATING FUNCTION.....	62
FIGURE 4.13: STAR ICON INDICATING THE MESSAGE AS MOST HELPFUL.....	63
FIGURE 4.14: DISPLAY SCREEN UPON STUDENT SELECTION THE QUESTION TYPE.....	64
FIGURE 4.15: SCREEN DISPLAYING POSSIBLE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS.....	64
FIGURE 4.16: OPTION TO EDIT, POST QUESTIONS AND SUBSCRIBE TO RECEIVE ANSWERS.....	65

FIGURE 5.1. TECHNOLOGY ACCEPTANCE MODEL, ADOPTED FROM DAVIS, BAGOZZI AND
WARSHAW (1989, P. 985).....69

List of tables

TABLE 2.1: SUMMARY OF INTERFACE SUPPORT FUNCTIONS OF EXISTING SYSTEMS.....	20
TABLE 2.2: SUMMARY OF SEARCH FUNCTIONS OF EXISTING ODFs	22
TABLE 3.1: SUMMARY OF THE ADD-ON INTERFACE FUNCTIONS.....	48
TABLE 5.1: USERS DATA.....	71
TABLE 5.2: MESSAGE TYPES USED IN THE INTER-INSTITUTIONAL INTERACTIONS.....	72
TABLE 5.3: SUBSCRIPTION FEATURES.....	72
TABLE 5.4: DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSES OF ITEMS: MEAN AND STANDARD VARIATION.....	73
TABLE 5.5: A SUMMARY OF MEAN WITH STANDARD DEVIATION FOR EACH DETERMINANT...	74
TABLE 5.6: CORRELATION INTENTION OF USE AND PERCEIVED EASE OF USE.....	75

List of charts

CHART 5.1: PARTICIPANTS POSTINGS BY MESSAGE TYPE.....	71
CHART 5.2: PARTICIPATION FREQUENCY.....	76
CHART 5.3: AVERAGE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS FOR EACH OF THE SEVEN MAIN ITEMS	79