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**MDB as an Effective Platform of Communication
between Students and Teachers
A Study of the Virtual University of Pakistan**

Abstract

The integration of distance learning and Information Communication technology has brought a lot of convenience for the students who were earlier facing problems in education due to time and geographical limitations. Since the concept of e-learning is comparatively new and different, the discourse on teaching methodologies and the student–teacher relationship in an e-learning environment has brought many new dimensions under discussion. In a virtual system, the communication bonding between a student and a teacher is not so strong. Students are dependent on one-way communication in the form of recorded lectures, published announcements, and information given on a website. Bridging the communication gap between a student and a teacher through MDB (Moderate Discussion Board) is an effective step taken by the Virtual University of Pakistan in online education to address students. The presented research was aimed at investigating the effectiveness of MDB as an interaction platform between students and course instructors at the Virtual University of Pakistan. The effectiveness of MDBs was measured through analysing the number of MDBs posted in a certain

course and the nature of questions asked in MDBs by students. It was a quantitative study in which two Mass Communication subjects were selected through purposive sampling. The collected data were analysed in percentages, and a statistical test Correlation was applied to find out if there was some relation between the strength of students and questions asked through MDB. The study found that although the number of MDBs is quite lower than that of enrolled students, it is an effective platform of communication between students and a teacher, as students can ask questions related to subject, exams, semester activities, and general concerns.

Key words: e-learning, MDB, communication gap, virtual system

Distance Learning and ICT

The integration of distance learning and Information Communication technology has brought a lot of convenience for the students who were earlier facing problems in education due to time and geographical limitations. It has indeed provided a great ease and flexibility to the aspiring students residing in far flung areas (Chang, 2002).

Since the concept of e-learning is comparatively new and different, the discourse on teaching methodologies and the student–teacher relationship in an e-learning environment has brought many new dimensions under discussion. Although in an online education system students have some opportunities to communicate with their teachers, these opportunities for communication and interaction are very limited and restricted in comparison to conventional teaching. Educationists and academics believe that interpersonal interaction between students and teachers is one of the key elements in any educational environment. Desmond Keegan believes that since students and teachers are communicating at a distance, the vital link of communication is lost, and thus that link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be “reintegrated” (Keegan, 1996).

The major source of interaction between a student and a teacher in an e-learning environment is e-mail. It is pertinent to mention here that a teacher in an e-learning institute can provide assistance to only those who have the knowledge thirst in them. Teaching techniques have been shifted to a student-centred approach, where a teacher is there to facilitate a student along with delivering formal education, and success can only be achieved with the collaborative effort of both a student and a teacher. Thus, the students’ ability and intent to understand course content and ask questions accordingly appear to be a crucial variable (Terzİ & ÇelİK, 2005).

In an online education system, automated grading is always preferred due to convenience, so it is normally restricted to multiple choice questions. This is easy for both students and teachers. Similarly, the result is announced and shared with students immediately after the quiz or exam. However, these multiple choice questions lack in qualitative feedback of the teacher (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Critics say that online education is good for multiple choice questions only. It is appreciated by teachers due to convenient marking, but it does not motivate students to think critically about new ideas. On the other hand, in a conventional mode of teaching, students get qualitative feedback not only in assignments, but also in classroom discussions. This interaction is missing in an online education system. To bridge this gap, certain platforms have been introduced in online education.

In online education, various platforms have been introduced, like discussion boards that make it possible for students to communicate with their teachers and ask subject-related and general queries. Such platforms help students remain active throughout the semester, and they get confidence through these interactions. These are also helpful to take students out of a passive learning environment by asking new questions from teachers. These discussion platforms help students interact with other students, which helps in learning and confidence building. Discussion boards give a feeling of classroom sharing and build a community of learners by student-student interaction (AlJeraisy, Mohammad, Fayyoubi, & Alrashideh, 2015).

Education can be effectively transformative when teachers and students synthesise and share information related to subjects and experiences with each other. Teachers are capable to inculcate critical learning among students and are fortified to improve their abilities of analysis, creativity, and self-awareness. Anna Sun and Xiufang Chen (2016) argued that a successful system of online education depends on the designed content, inspired communication between the instructors and students, and a supportive system of communication. As they further added, what should be developed is an online educational community that motivates on-going conversation of operative plans that can improve faculties' and universities' achievements in transitioning to online teaching.

The online education system has been getting popular all over the world. Flexible education settings have been incorporated by distance education system to facilitate the quality education and learning opportunities to the public. The learning tools of distance learning enable students and teachers to bridge the learning gap due to geographical dissemination (Nsiah & Oti-Boadi, 2015).

Online education is becoming more popular due to its easy access to content, instructions, and guidance. It can provide an opportunity to learn for persons who cannot attend the conventional classroom. The online learning system provides the best forum in assembling the informational content more effectively. Kathleen J. Marino (2012) explored the faculty viewpoint and the faculty's adaptation of social presence in the online system. It has been found that faculty members of the online education system interact effectively with students by replying

to their queries, but have less intimacy. The faculty members are required to develop a balance between intimacy and interactivity by trying different means like video chats.

J. Mateo and A. Sangra (2007) claimed that quality of learning not only depends on the success of students, but is also related to the effectiveness of instructions that have been given by the instructors. They emphasised the need of improvement in the assessment method of distance education and recommended to focus on students' learning through the process of feedback. Muntajeb Ali Baig (2011) found in his research that the achievement of students in an online learning environment is higher than in the face-to-face learning conditions. He further added that interaction among students and teachers in face-to-face learning system is limited whereas students can interact in online learning environment more effectively and receive guidance along with the valuable content, so an online teaching system makes learning process more centred.

The educated and skilled manpower is crucial for social and economic development of any state. In this regard, universities have adopted open and distance learning systems to give education and skill to the students. Bogadi Nage-Sibande and Bantu Lulu Morolong (2018) conducted a case study at University of Botswana and found that universities are required to change their action plans with reference to open and distance learning systems and enhance this system to create uniformity between open / distance systems and face-to-face facility. This is achieved with improving the communication facility among teachers and students.

The Virtual University of Pakistan is completely based on modern information and communication technologies. It is promoting an equal opportunity of standard education to all Pakistani, even abroad. In view of the lack of qualitative interaction between students and teachers, a platform of MDB (Moderate Discussion Board) has been introduced. This platform provides an opportunity for students to ask the course instructor a subject / lesson related query. Students can ask any subject-related or semester activity related question through MDB. Students can also post their own comments in response to other students' queries. MDBs are replied to on priority basis by course instructors to give immediate responses to students.

This research was aimed at investigating the effectiveness of MDB as an interaction platform between students and course instructors at the Virtual University of Pakistan. The effectiveness of MDBs was measured through analysing the number of MDBs posted in a certain course and nature of questions asked in MDBs by students.

Research objectives:

- to find out the frequency of MDBs asked by the students in one semester,
- to find out the nature of questions being asked by students in MDB.

Research methodology:

It was a quantitative study in which two Mass Communication subjects were selected through purposive sampling. MDBs of two subjects of Mass

Communication MCM101 (Introduction to Mass Communication) and MCM301 (Communication Skills) for eight semesters – from Spring 2014 to Fall 2017 – were studied. The rationale of selecting these subjects is similarity as one of the basic subjects with maximum enrolment. This research studied the frequency and nature of asked questions through MDB in these courses.

Data Analysis

Figure 1 shows the number of enrolled students in MCM101 in each semester and the number of MDBs asked by the students.

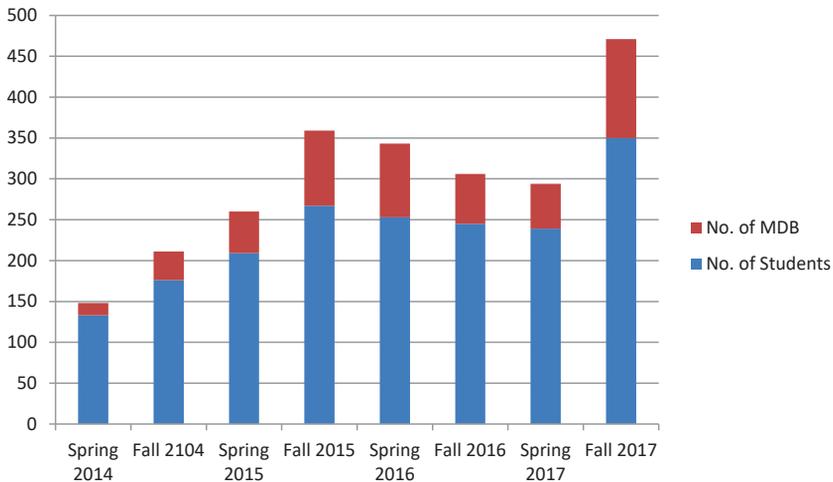


Figure 1. Ratio of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM101.

S o u r c e : Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of enrolled students increased until the Fall 2015 semester, and there is a decrease in enrolment in Spring 2016, Fall 2016, and Spring 2017; in turn, Fall 2017 has the maximum number of enrolled students – 350. Similarly, the number of asked MDBs was highest in the Fall 2017 semester – it equalled 121. The data shown in Figure 2 and Table 2 indicate that the number of asked MDBs is also increasing with the increase in students in MCM101.

Table 1.
Ratio of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM101

Semester	No. of MDB	No. of enrolled students
Spring 2014	15	133
Fall 2014	35	176
Spring 2015	51	209
Fall 2015	92	267
Spring 2016	90	253
Fall 2016	61	245
Spring 2017	55	239
Fall 2017	121	350

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

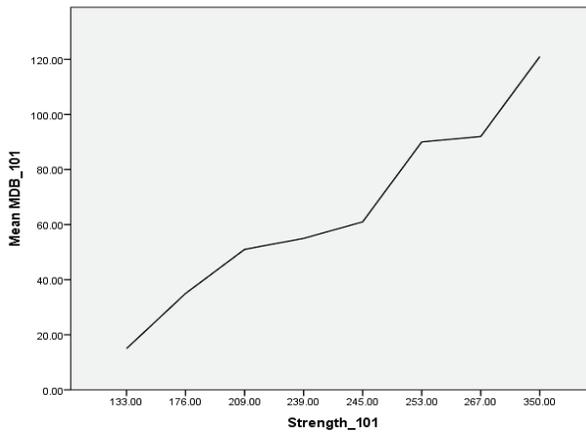


Figure 2. Correlation of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM101.

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

Table 2.
Correlation of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM101

	Strength_101	MDB_101
Strength_101	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.963**
	N	8
MDB_101	Pearson Correlation	.963**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	8

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

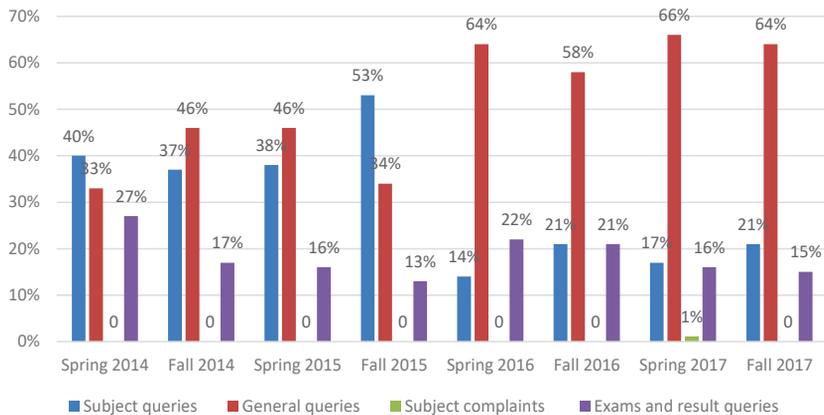


Figure 3. Semester wise MDB data of MCM101.

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

Various categories of queries in the MDB have been assigned the following values:

- subject queries,
- general queries,
- subject complaints, and
- exams and result queries.

Table 3 shows the data obtained in four categories of MDB queries in semester wise and presents the questions asked by students on MDB with reference to the abovementioned four categories.

As shown in Table 3, in Spring 2014, students asked 40% queries related to the subject's content, 33% students asked about general queries, 27% – about exams related queries, and no complaint was found. In Fall 2014, 37% of MDB queries were asked about subject related issues, 46% were about general matters, and 17% of queries concerned exams; no issue was found with reference to the subject. In Spring 2015, students asked 38% queries about the content of the subject, and 46% queries were related to the general concerns regarding the subject; no complaints were found. In Fall 2015, 53% of queries were found related to the subject, 34% of general queries were asked, and 13% of queries were asked about exam related issues; no complaints were found. In Spring 2016, 14% of students asked subject related queries, 64% asked about general issues, and 22% asked queries related to exams; no query was found related to the subject complaints. In the Fall 2016 semester, 21% of students asked subject related queries, 58% asked general queries, and 21% – exam and result related queries; no complaints were found in this semester. In Spring 2017, 17% of students asked about subject related issues, 66% asked general queries, 16% posted exam and result related queries, and 1% complained about the course issue. In Fall 2017, 21% of queries

were related to the subject's content, 64% were of general queries, and 15% were asked about the exams and results issues by the students.

Table 3.
Code sheet of MCM101

S. No.	ID	Semester	Subject queries (series 1)	Categories		
				General queries (series 2)	Subject complaints (series 3)	Exams and result queries (series 4)
1	1	Spring 2014	6 (40%)	5 (33%)	0	4 (27%)
2	1	Fall 2014	13 (37%)	16 (46%)	0	6 (17%)
3	1	Spring 2015	19 (38%)	23 (46%)	0	8 (16%)
4	1	Fall 2015	50 (53%)	32 (34%)	0	12 (13%)
5	1	Spring 2016	12 (14%)	57 (64%)	0	19 (22%)
6	1	Fall 2016	13 (21%)	35 (58%)	0	13 (21%)
7	1	Spring 2017	10 (17%)	35 (66%)	1 (1%)	9 (16%)
8	1	Fall 2017	30 (21%)	87 (64%)	0	22 (15%)

Note: Serials depict categories of student queries in MDB

Key: **ID:** for identification of the subjects, **value 1** will be assigned to MCM101, MCM301=2; **semester:** Spring 2014=1, Fall 2014=2, Spring 2015=3, Fall 2015=4, Spring 2016=5, Fall 2016=6, Spring 2017=7, Fall 2017=8.

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

MCM301

Figure 4 and Table 4 show that there is an increase in the number of enrolled students from Spring 2014 to Fall 2017.

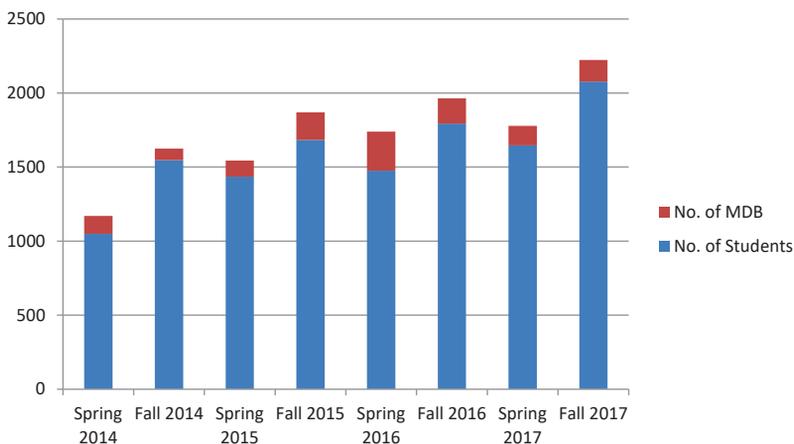


Figure 4. Ratio of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM301.

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

Table 4.

Ratio of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM301

Semester	No. of MDB	No. of enrolled students
Spring 2014	120	1050
Fall 2014	78	1547
Spring 2015	108	1436
Fall 2015	185	1684
Spring 2016	263	1476
Fall 2016	172	1793
Spring 2017	132	1647
Fall 2017	145	2078

S o u r c e : Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

The Fall 2017 semester has the highest number of students enrolled in MCM301, whereas the highest number of MDBs asked by students was 263 in Spring 2016. One can observe that there is a decline in asking MDB by the students enrolled in MCM301. As can be seen in Figure 5 and Table 5, there is an increase in the number of enrolled students, but the number of MDBs asked by students is not increasing in accordance.

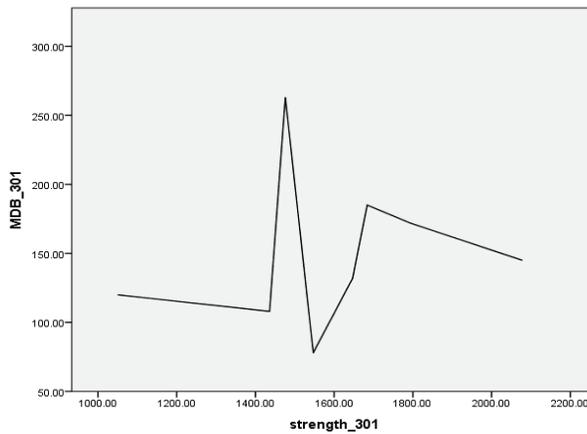


Figure 5. Correlation of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM301.

S o u r c e : Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

Table 5.
Correlation of MDBs asked to the number of enrolled students in MCM301

		strength_301	MDB_301
strength_301	Pearson Correlation	1	.145
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.732
	N	8	8
MDB_301	Pearson Correlation	.145	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.732	
	N	8	8

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

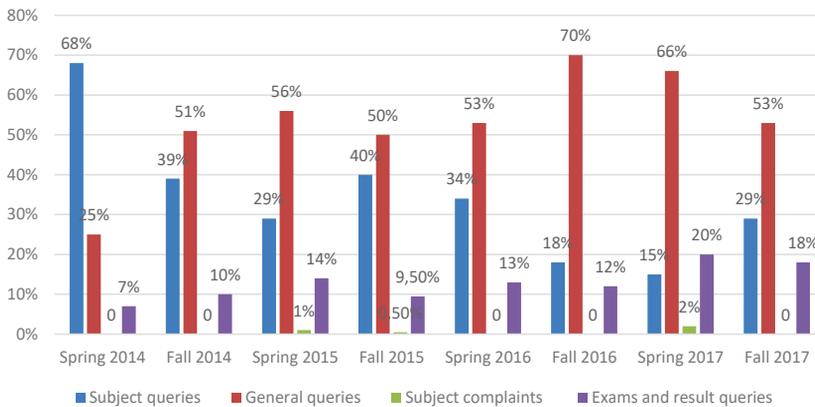


Figure 6. Semester wise data of MCM301.

Source: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

Table 6 shows the data obtained in the four categories of MDB queries. In the Spring 2014 semester, 68% of students' queries were subject queries, 25% – general queries and 7% – exam and result queries. In Fall 2014, 39% of queries concerned academic subjects, 51% – general issues, and 10% – exams and their results. In Spring 2015, 29% of queries students asked were subject queries, 56% – general queries, 1% – subject complaints, and 14% – exams and result queries. In the Fall 2015 semester, students queries were related to: subject (40%), general issues (50%), complaints (0.5%) and exams and results (9.5%). In the Spring 2016 semester, 34% of students' queries were related to subjects, 53% to general issues, and 13% to exams and results. In Fall 2016, students asked about subject matters – 18% of queries, general issues – 70% of queries, and exams and results – 12% of MDB queries. In Spring 2017, there were 12% of student queries related to subjects, 66% of queries concerned general issues, 2% of queries with complaints, and 20% of queries about exams and results. In Fall 2017, most queries were about

general issues (53%), 29% of queries were about academic subjects, and 18% of queries were related to exams and results.

Table 6.
Code sheet

S. No.	ID	Semester	Subject queries (series 1)	Categories (%)		
				General queries (series 2)	Subject complaints (series 3)	Exams and result queries (series 4)
1	2	Spring 2014	80 (68%)	30 (25%)	0	9 (7%)
2	2	Fall 2014	30 (39%)	40 (51%)	0	8 (10%)
3	2	Spring 2015	31 (29%)	61 (56%)	1 (1%)	15 (14%)
4	2	Fall 2015	73 (40%)	92 (50%)	1(0.5%)	19 (9.5%)
5	2	Spring 2016	88 (34%)	139 (53%)	0	36 (13%)
6	2	Fall 2016	30 (18%)	121 (70%)	0	21 (12%)
7	2	Spring 2017	15 (12%)	87 (66%)	3 (2%)	27 (20%)
8	2	Fall 2017	41 (29%)	77 (53%)	0	27 (18%)

Note: Serials depict categories of student queries in MDB

Key: ID: for identification of the subjects, **value 1** will be assigned to MCM101, MCM301=2; **semester:** Spring 2014=1, Fall 2014=2, Spring 2015=3, Fall 2015=4, Spring 2016=5, Fall 2016=6, Spring 2017=7, Fall2017=8; **categories:** various categories in the MDB have been assigned the following values: subject queries (series 1), general queries (series 2), subject complaints (series 3), exams and result queries (series 4).

S o u r c e: Data collected from Virtual University Learning Management System (Course Interface).

From the data obtained it can be concluded that MDB is an effective platform for addressing general queries of students (51%, 56%, 50%, 53%, 70%, 66%, and 53%), followed by students' subject queries (68%, 34%, 39%, and 40%). MDBs to some extent address students' queries related to exams and results (18%, 20%, 14%), which indicates additional guidance provided to students through MDB.

Discussion and Conclusion

It can be concluded from the data that MDB is an effective platform for addressing general queries of students. Data analysis shows that not only do students use MDB to ask questions related to lessons, but also the platform provides an opportunity for students to ask exam related queries and questions of general nature. The ratio of asked MDBs to enrolled students is quite low. In Spring 2015, 1,436 students were enrolled in MCM301, but only 95 MDBs were received

throughout the semester. However, there is an increase in asked MDBs, as it was highest in Spring 2016 – the semester with 263 MDBs and 1,476 enrolled students. In turn, in MCM101 the highest number of MDBs was 121 with 350 students. Results show that the number of MDBs asked by students in MCM301 is decreasing, whereas the number of MDBs is increasing with the increase in enrolled students in each semester. The data analysis shows that the ratio of asking MDB was higher in MCM101 as compared to MCM301.

The data analysis shows that MDB is an effective platform of communication between students and teachers. Lack of relationship building and interaction in online education may seem minor, but they have large effects on teachers and students. Although the opportunity for teachers and students to interact still exists in online education, it is often criticised as a more limited environment that cannot reproduce the same depth of interactions that occur face-to-face. Interpersonal interactions are considered to be essential by many educators and learners. These types of interaction can help learners and instructors develop a feeling of community and connectedness to the course.

In virtual systems, the communication bonding between a student and a teacher is not strong. Students depend on one-way communication in the form of recorded lectures, published announcements, and information given on the website. Bridging the communication gap between students and teachers through MDB is an effective step taken by the Virtual University of Pakistan in online education, as students can ask subject related and general queries.

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Nadia Saleem, Aisha M Din, Saba Sadiq, Masroor Ahmed

MDB jako efektywna platforma komunikacji między uczniami a nauczycielami: studium z Uniwersytetu Wirtualnego w Pakistanie

Streszczenie

Integracja nauczania na odległość oraz technologii komunikacyjnych i informacyjnych stała się źródłem wielu udogodnień dla uczniów, którzy wcześniej doświadczali problemów z edukacją z powodu ograniczeń czasowych lub geograficznych. Ponieważ e-learning jest pojęciem nowym i odmiennym, dyskurs dotyczący metodologii nauczania i relacji uczeń-nauczyciel w środowisku e-learningowym wprowadził wiele nowych elementów wartych omówienia i rozważenia. W systemie wirtualnym powiązanie komunikacyjne między uczniem a nauczycielem nie jest tak mocne jak w systemie klasycznym. Uczniowie muszą polegać na jednostronnej komunikacji w postaci nagranych wykładów, publikowanych ogłoszeń lub informacji zamieszczanych w sieci. Redukowanie luki komunikacyjnej między uczniem a nauczycielem za pomocą MDB (platformy zarządzania dyskusją) jest efektywnym krokiem w zakresie edukacji online podjętym przez Uniwersytet Wirtualny w Pakistanie. Prezentowane w artykule badania miały na celu zbadanie efektywności MDB jako platformy interakcji między uczniami a instruktorami na Uniwersytecie Wirtualnym w Pakistanie. Efektywność MDB mierzono za pomocą analizy liczby MDB wysłanych w ramach danego kursu oraz rodzaju pytań zadawanych za pośrednictwem MDB przez studentów. Przeprowadzono badanie ilościowe, w którym wybrano poprzez losowanie celowe dwa przedmioty z kursu Komunikacji Masowej. Dane zebrano i poddano analizie procentowej, a także zastosowano statystyczny test korelacji, aby stwierdzić, czy istnieje zależność między liczbą uczniów a pytaniami zadawanymi poprzez MDB. Stwierdzono, że chociaż liczba MDB jest niższa od liczby uczniów, którzy zapisali się na kurs, to jednak MDB stanowi efektywną platformę komunikacji między uczniem a nauczycielem. Dzieje się

так, ponieważ uczniowie mogą zadawać pytania odnoszące się do przedmiotu, egzaminów, aktywności w semestrze oraz spraw ogólnych.

Слова ключowe: e-learning, MDB, luka komunikacyjna, system wirtualny

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Модерируемая доска обсуждений (MDB) как эффективная платформа общения студентов и преподавателей: исследование виртуального университета Пакистана

Аннотация

Интеграция дистанционного обучения и информационно-коммуникационных технологий принесла много удобства студентам, которые ранее сталкивались с проблемами в образовании из-за временных и географических ограничений. Поскольку концепция электронного обучения является сравнительно новой, дискурс в области методологии преподавания и взаимоотношениям учителей и учеников в среде электронного обучения привел к обсуждению многих новых аспектов. В виртуальной системе связь между учеником и учителем не так сильна. Студенты зависят от одностороннего общения в форме записанных лекций, опубликованных объявлений и информации, представленной на веб-сайте. Преодоление разрыва в общении между учеником и преподавателем с помощью MDB (модерируемая доска обсуждений) - это эффективный шаг, предпринятый Виртуальным университетом Пакистана в онлайн-образовании для решения проблем студентов. Это исследование было направлено на изучение эффективности MDB как платформы взаимодействия между студентами и преподавателями курса в Виртуальном университете Пакистана. Эффективность MDB измерялась путем анализа количества сообщений, опубликованных в определенном курсе, и характера вопросов, задаваемых студентами. Это было количественное исследование, в котором 2 предмета из массовых коммуникаций были отобраны путем целенаправленной выборки. Собранные данные были проанализированы в процентах, и был применен статистический корреляционный анализ, чтобы выяснить, есть ли какая-то связь между уровнем студента и вопросом, задаваемым через MDB. Исследование показало, что, хотя число вопросов в MDB значительно меньше, чем зачисленных студентов, тем не менее, это эффективная платформа общения между учениками и преподавателями, поскольку студенты могут задавать вопросы, связанные с предметом, экзаменами, семестровой деятельностью и общими проблемами.

Ключевые слова: электронное обучение, модерируемая доска обсуждений (MDB), коммуникационный разрыв, виртуальная система

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MDB como plataforma efectiva de comunicación entre estudiantes y profesores: un estudio en la Universidad Virtual de Pakistán

Resumen

La integración de la enseñanza a distancia y las tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación ha generado viabilidad a los estudiantes que antes tenían dificultades debido a las limitaciones de tiempo y espacio. Considerando que el concepto de e-learning es relativamente nuevo, el discurso sobre las metodologías de enseñanzas y la relación que se establece entre el profesorado y el alumnado ha generado nuevas perspectivas de análisis. En la enseñanza virtual hay dificultades en la relación entre docentes y alumnado. Los estudiantes dependen de la comunicación establecida en una sola dirección en forma de clases grabadas, material publicado y la información en la web. Eliminar los problemas de comunicación entre el profesorado y el alumnado a través de MDB (Moderate Discussion Board) es un objetivo de la Universidad Virtual de Pakistán en sus cursos virtuales. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo investigar la eficacia de MDB como plataforma de interacción entre estudiantes y docentes en la Universidad Virtual de Pakistán. La eficacia de los MDB se midió a través del análisis de la cantidad de MDB publicados en un curso determinado y la naturaleza de las preguntas formuladas en los MDB por los estudiantes. El estudio es cuantitativo en el que se seleccionaron 2 asignaturas de Mass Communication a través de un muestreo intencional. Los datos recopilados se analizaron en porcentajes y a través de una prueba de correlación para determinar si existe alguna relación entre las competencias de los estudiantes y las preguntas formulada a través de MDB. Los resultados muestran que el número de MDB es bastante inferior al de los estudiantes matriculados, sin embargo, resultó una plataforma eficaz de comunicación entre estudiantes y docentes, ya que los estudiantes pueden hacer preguntas relacionadas con la materia, los exámenes, las actividades del semestre y sobre cuestiones generales.

Palabras clave: e-learning, MDB, brecha de comunicación, sistema virtual