Engaging Students in Online Classes with WIMBA: A Preliminary Study

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ENGAGING STUDENTS IN ONLINE CLASSES WITH WIMBA: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the issue of keeping students engaged in online classes with the purpose of creating a favorable experience for the student. The author shares their experience of using the synchronous WIMBA tool embedded in a web-based course management software system.

Keywords

Online teaching, web classrooms, synchronous tools, WIMBA

INTRODUCTION

Web-enhanced and web-centric classrooms are now commonly found on many college and university campuses and have taken many forms. Virtual universities are completely web-centric and designed so that students can complete their entire degree online. More traditional universities have also expanded into the online degree format, but still continue to offer campus-based degrees as well. In a controlled, longitudinal study of 277 schools, AACSB found that 24% of the schools surveyed offered at least one of their business programs online (AACSB, 2010) with the largest increase in graduate programs. And finally you have the traditional bricks and mortar college degree programs, which in many instances, consists of courses that are web-enhanced through the use of some type of course management tool such as Blackboard.

Regardless of format, some researchers (Astani, Ready, and Duplaga, 2010) found that students have a more favorable perception of their online experience when they are more engaged in the web experience, and have a chance to interact with their classmates. In another study (Kovacs, Davis, et al., 2010) found that CIS students actually prefer the traditional classroom, and seem to suggest that online classes cannot duplicate the same learning environment, as though there is something missing in the online format.

This paper will discuss the unique challenges of keeping students engaged in the web classrooms, and present one professor’s experience of using the synchronous WIMBA utility in their course to counteract these challenges and enrich the online experience for students.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE CLASSROOMS

Online courses should not be limited to dissemination of information in a static format. In many online classes we see curriculum presented in an asynchronous format, with syllabi, PowerPoint slides, and assignments posted on the web for students to retrieve at their leisure. This type of approach could be classified as content-centered course...
management instead of student-centered. In fully online classes, many times faculty do not communicate with students beyond email messages, discussion board postings, and posting of grades.

In one preliminary study (Kim, 2009) the researcher discussed the limitations of static course design in online course. Tools such as assessment, email, assignment postings, and calendar tools are common in web classes, but enriching them with collaboration technology might contribute additional learning opportunities. Researchers in another study (Li and Pitts, 2009) further added that student-faculty interaction could be improved with online office hours using technologies such as chat and instant messaging. This approach can be used for online classes as well as traditional on-campus courses, and the benefits would increase the students’ overall level of satisfaction with the course.

Teaching online classes is time consuming and exploring new technologies can be an issue with junior faculty who instead commit a good majority of their resources to research in order to get tenured. One set of researchers (He and Schell, 2009) examined faculty perceptions about the effectiveness of web-based learning and how it may or may not impact promotion and tenure decisions. The results of their study indicated that the perceived effectiveness of web courses dropped over time, despite research to the contrary, but no reasons were given. While there are many directions that faculty can take with online courses, one such path could be the use of WIMBA.

**SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION CAPABILITIES WITHIN WIMBA**

WIMBA is a synchronous collaboration tool found in the Blackboard course management system (Blackboard, 2010). This utility can be used to both enhance a traditional classroom and or conduct a completely online class in real-time. Faculty members who use Blackboard can add in the WIMBA tool as a content link under the Build tab of their course.

The WIMBA utility is essentially a “live” classroom with communication capabilities consisting of voice/audio, video, and text chat. The instructor can choose one or all of these features to use online, and will as a minimum require a microphone, and possibly a headset or a good set of speakers. Students who are online will also require a microphone and headset/speaker combination, which is typically built into most laptops purchased in the market today. An alternative communication capability allows students who cannot access the internet, to call into the course and listen/engage the classroom live via phone. A unique phone number and pin code is provided to students to allow for this communication access, as shown in Figure 1.

![Wimba Classroom](image)

**Figure 1: Communication with online classroom with phone access**
Students and instructors can also communicate publicly or privately through the text-based chat utility embedded at the bottom of each Wimba window. Additional features for this utility include buttons (yes, no, hand raise, applause, and assorted emoticons) that students can use to respond to the instructor on the screen. For example, the instructor can survey the class to see if they have understood the material thus far, and students can respond with an affirmation or a negative on the screen. The hand raise feature identifies students who have a question, in a sequential order, numbering the students in the order of engagement online.

METHODS FOR DISPLAYING CONTENT

Displaying content in WIMBA can be accomplished by the following methods: imported PowerPoint slides; Web Page links; or sharing of all desktop applications. Figure 2 below shows an example of importing PowerPoint slides directly into the WIMBA classroom. With this method, students are able to completely see the lecture and easily identify which slide the instructor is currently discussing. The titles of each slide are displayed on the right hand side, allowing the presenter or instructor to jump around and locate only those that are needed for discussion.

![Figure 2: Imported PowerPoint in Wimba classroom](image)

The Web sharing method provides a means to display web pages within the window frame. The limitation on using this method is that if the user clicks beyond the initial home page of the website, the students are not able to see the additional pages.

The last method for displaying content is probably the most flexible and engaging since it allows ANY of the participants (not just the instructor) in the WIMBA classroom to share ANYTHING on their desktop. Identified as desktop sharing, this feature allows live demonstrations of other applications such as Word, Excel, and
programming tools. In addition, this feature can be used by the students to share their work with the rest of the class for a project presentation, or just with the instructor for remote assistance during online office hours. I found this particular method to be the most useful in teaching my Information Systems courses which require heavy use of software outside of Microsoft PowerPoint.

ARCHIVE SESSIONS

Students who miss the live class or want to review materials later can do so with the archive feature that the instructor must engage at the beginning of each session. Archived sessions will then be displayed in a sequential list by date and time on the archive page, and the course calendar, if the instructor chooses.

One limitation with the archiving feature that this instructor discovered is that you cannot rename the date and time label or identify the content of each archive. Archiving the class, records everything in the live session with the exception of private chats, and break out room activity. A nice feature of the archive includes the capability for students to download the session to their IPods and other mobile devices in both MP3 and MP4 formats, as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3: Archived Sessions available in MP3 and MP4 format](image-url)
Engaging Students Online with WIMBA

Overall the instructor was pleased with the capabilities and results of using WIMBA, and found it to be a viable asset for every class period. Students expected me to use it, and commented that they wished other teachers would use it too. Using this technology, however, is not without its challenges. Table 1 summarizes some of the challenges encountered by this instructor while using WIMBA in multiple classes, over several semesters. The format of the classes included both fully online classes, and traditional face-to-face sections that were web-enhanced. The only feature not used in these classes was the video capability, and therefore I minimized any writing I did on the whiteboards in the traditional classroom.

Table 1: Summary of WIMBA challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Must have internet access; maintenance downtown scheduled during one of my class periods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content sharing disconnected a few times and students could not see the desktop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The archiving disconnected occasionally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students stopped attending class and used the archived sessions as the primary source of their education, less engaged in the live classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students did not engage online during, they just listened to live classroom, or listened to archive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students thought they would just listen to class later and never did</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the professor, I did not get to know my students as well, since I did not see them as much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seems to work better with more responsible students, particularly graduate students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not capture any whiteboard notes, unless using the video capability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this is an ongoing assessment, additional details and challenges will be presented at the conference. The instructor will continue to do research in this area, including soliciting both qualitative and quantitative feedback from students about their experience in using WIMBA.

SUMMARY

Engaging students on the web can be a challenge, but tools such as WIMBA can assist with that challenge. Table 2 summarizes some of the key features and benefits of using this collaboration tool.

Table 2: Summary of key features of WIMBA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Synchronous collaboration tool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students hear and see instructor, they can respond as long as they have microphone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can see PowerPoint, websites, and shared desktop; they can also share theirs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class lecture can be archived and downloaded later in MP3 or MP4 format</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can use WIMBA for online office hours and look at student’s work remotely</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student can call in remotely to the classroom without being online and listen to the live classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes video capability to capture live feed of instructor, individuals, and/or notes on a whiteboard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this instance, the instructor continues to learn, and adapt to the challenges, while embracing the benefits of online engagement using the WIMBA tool. It is indeed a valuable utility that I would encourage others to use to enhance
their courses. Research in online teaching will continue to evolve and provide more answers as to the efficiency, appropriateness, and engagement of students in the courses.

REFERENCES