

Informal Feedback in Distance Education

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1 INTRODUCTION

Evaluation in an educational context is often associated with conscious and formal activities directed towards formative or summative purposes (Oliver 1997). In addition, there are also more subtle and informal sources of evaluative feedback that constantly reaches the members of a classroom. The air is literally filled with unobtrusive ephemeral queues that can be interpreted in terms of feedback (Schmidt & Simone, 1996). The students can express their degree of interest and concentration through the way they sit, the expression on their faces, where the look and through other body-lingual expressions. There is a big difference between a student looking directly at the teacher, nodding the head and smiling, and a student with the arms crossed over the chest, starring at the ceiling with a bored yawn. The formal systems and instruments for evaluation can easily be transformed and perhaps even enhanced by the use of IT, but the equally important informal feedback is to a great extent lost in the virtual classroom. Luff & Heath (1992) discuss video-based mediaspaces for collaborative work. Video-conferencing provides poor support for non-verbal communication such as body language, glances and head nods. Factors such as the distance between camera and monitor as well as the delays between action and reaction affects the interaction. In asynchronous text communication, this problem is even exacerbated although 'smileys' and other emoticons can help to reduce the effects.

2 THE BAROMETER

This paper presents a web-application, called *the barometer*, that address the loss of verbal as well as non-verbal informal feedback mentioned above. The

application supports through a simple interface the indication of present mood or attitude with a click on the mouse on a green rectangle, labeled "positive" or on a red rectangle labeled "negative" and subsequently submitting the verdict. It is also possible to add textual comments as annotations to the mood-indication. (fig 1.)

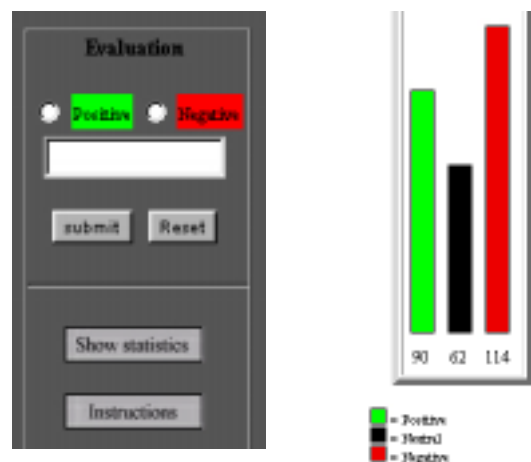


Fig 1. Barometer interface and graph with statistics

The barometer displays cumulative statistics of the mood-indications made during the course. A submission without explicit green or red indication is interpreted as a neutral mood. The timed entries are presented in descending chronological order. The text is color-coded in green or red corresponding to the mood-indication. To the right of the list there is a graph showing the total number of positive, neutral and negative indications. (fig 1)

3 A PILOT STUDY

The subjects of the study were 60 students in Systems Analysis that met twice a week, at six multiparty

videoconferencing sessions,. Distribution of course material, tutoring and cooperative project work was facilitated by a shared course web-site that also hosted the barometer.

The analysis of text entries draws upon a coding-scheme proposed by Orlikowski and Yates, (1994). Each entry is coded with respect to indicators for (i) Structure (smileys, capital letters, exclamation etc.) (ii) Language (humor, sarcasm, etc.) and (iii) Purpose (mood-indication, explicit feedback etc.) The entries coded as having a primary purpose of giving explicit were then analyzed using the following nominal scale. (1) Agree/Disagree with other author, (2) Success/Failure-report, (3) Explanation, and (4) Suggestion for change.

The four weeks of use resulted in 213 submissions evenly distributed throughout the study period, of which 63 included a comment. 57 % of the comments were coded in red, 10% neutral and 33% positive. Most comments are short and have an informal, structure and language. The use of smileys, capital letters and (repeated) exclamations and question marks is very common. A majority (63 %) of the text entries had a pure purpose of expressing the author's "mood".

"I hope this will be of use to me later, or else I will puke"

"I'm actually on top of things, GREAT!!!!!"

27% of the comments contained an evaluative content of some sort, these gave feedback on the learning technology, teachers performance and course content. The nature of feedback in these entries were classified as reports of success (6 entries), reports of failure (8) agreeing with a previous entry (1) and suggestions for change (3).

"Probability theory is rather fun!"

"It's great if you sort ther files in time-order"

4 DISCUSSION

Erickson [2] discusses how social cues could be used in order to navigate a hypertext. In a similar way, the Barometer invites the user to leave explicit, marks on the web-site, thereby giving social signals to be picked up and interpreted by the other members of the community.

The bar-charts and the list of red and green text-comments shows a snapshot as well as the history of these signals that, when interpreted by the users, gives them a social awareness of the course-atmosphere. Ackerman and Starr (1995) argues that such social

awareness can contribute to better performance throughout a community.

Further studies will show if designs like the Barometer can be used as compensation for the loss of informal communication in educational settings. If so, there is a need for the users to lift these signals from the subconscious level of body language to a level of conscious action. In this, there is of course a risk of loosing the element of spontaneity that makes it impossible to lie with body language.

5 REFERENCES

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