Strengthening Learner Participation in Online Courses: 
The Role of Digital Content Curation

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Abstract

Digital Content Curation in online learning environments offers learners the opportunity to become learner-curationists, and instructors to evolve into educator-curator. In this study the learners were 27 graduate student at a large Midwestern research-intensive university majoring in educational technology. A preliminary content of analysis of students’ end-of-course reflections shows that students value their role as learner-curator. Some light is shed on the role of digital content curation as an alternative to online course participation.

Introduction

Much has been investigated on how to support learners to be successful in online learning environments (e.g., Hew & Cheung, 2008; Salmon, 2011; Wang, 2008). Research has identified several problems related to online discussions, such as limited student participation (Hewitt, 2005), inadequate critical analysis of peers’ ideas (Rourke & Anderson, 2002), lack of motivation, commitment, and time, and failure to communicate effectively (Brooks & Jeong, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to introduce digital content curation as a strategy to overcome much of the lack of motivation, commitment and communication among online learners and offer an alternative way to participate online that builds on the rise of “share the sharing” culture. Following are the research issues that guided this study:

- What types of resources learners find suitable for exploring specific topics?
- How can the quality of curated artifacts be evaluated?
- What are learners’ perceptions of the benefits for engaging in content curation?

Digital Content Curation

The word “curation” in Latin comes from “curare,” which means, to take care of or to preserve. In today’s world curation leads to a re-interpretation of the use of digital resources. Content curation was mentioned for the first time in 2009 and 2011 in Bhargava’s blog. At that time, this concept was more focused on online marketing than on education. He defined content curation as: “the act of finding, grouping, organizing or sharing the best and most relevant content on a specific issue” (Bhargava, 2011, para 4). Different from content creation, curation refers to finding and providing a link to the content one has not created. Curated content is meaningful, filtered and directed toward a specific target or topic. The power of collaborative content curation emanates from the fact that it is filtered and organized by humans.
Methods and Data Sources

In this study, the focus is on the learner-curator. The learner being a graduate student in educational technology at a large Midwestern research-intensive university. Twenty-seven students participated in this study between January and May 2015. They were enrolled in an online graduate course on program evaluation and usability and most of them were part-time students working in a multitude of related professions ranging from teachers to user experience designers. A part of students’ graded course participation consisted on curating specific theme-related artifacts using Scoop.it (http://www.scoop.it/).

Data was directly collected using Scoop.it by analyzing the artifacts curated. Students were expected to curate at least one resource related to a specific theme and to react to at least two other artifacts curated by one of their peers and/or instructors. Content from students’ end-of-course reflections was also gathered and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis – Types of digital resources curated by learners

Students curated different types of artifacts. They included: a) illustrations, infographics or any other visual, b) videos, c) articles published in online journals, or websites, d) websites or blogs, and e) resources or tools for immediate application or use (e.g. PowerPoint slides, software applications, and others). The most common type of artifact curated in all three themes was websites/blogs with a total number of 44. Following was articles with a total number of 18 articles. And the third most common artifact was videos with a total number of 7. Two resources/tools were also curated.

Seventy-five was the total number of artifacts curated for the class topics: 1) Formative and Summative Evaluation vs. Usability Testing, 2) Collecting Evaluative Information, and 3) Politics, Ethics and Standards of Evaluation. From this total, 28 artifacts were curated under topic 1 (including three illustrations, four videos, four articles, sixteen websites/blogs, and one resource/tool); a total of 27 artifacts on topic 2 were curated (including one illustration, two videos, five articles, and nineteen websites/blogs); and topic 3 elicited 20 curations (including one video, nine articles, nine websites/blogs, and one resource/tool).

The 28 artifacts curated regarding topic 1 generated 32 insights and 57 reactions. Topic 2 led to 27 curations, 28 insights and 40 reactions and finally the last topic created 20 artifacts, 19 insights and 24 reactions.

Qualitative Analysis – Quality of the curated artifacts

A set of criteria for establishing quality of each curated artifact was developed: “Contemporary” (e.g., does the artifact reflect emergent trends in the topic being discussed?), “Relevance” (e.g., is the artifact content supported by evidence provided by the course readings?), “Value Added” (e.g., does the artifact content add details about the topic?), “Independent” (e.g., is the artifact free from advertisement?), “Accuracy” (e.g., is the information about the topic primary or secondary?), and “Authorship” (e.g., is the author of the artifact's professional and contact information provided?).

Each artifact was analyzed using the criteria defined above. If there was a match to a criterion regarding the artifact under analysis, points were assigned. The quality of the curated artifacts would range from 0 to 16, being 16 points the maximum of quality. Curated artifacts under topic 1 (Formative and Summative Evaluation vs. Usability Testing) exhibited an average of 11.86 points regarding quality; artifacts on topic 2 (Collecting Evaluative Information) showed an average of 12.37 points; and finally artifacts on topic 3 (Politics, Ethics and Standards of Evaluation) presented an average of 11.30 points. Quality of all the curated artifacts was definitely above 8 points, which would correspond to an average of quality (See Table 1). These results show that illustration, videos, articles, and websites/blogs on methods of collecting evaluative data exhibit the highest quality in terms of relevance, added value, accuracy, etc.
Table 1- Quality of the curated artifacts. It ranges from 0 to 16, being 16 points the maximum of quality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Quality of the curated artifact</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic 1: Formative and Summative Evaluation vs. Usability Testing</td>
<td>11.86</td>
<td>76.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 2: Collecting Evaluative Information</td>
<td>12.37</td>
<td>80.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 3: Politics, Ethics and Standards of Evaluation</td>
<td>11.30</td>
<td>75.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content Analysis - Learners’ perceptions of content curation benefits

A preliminary content of analysis of students’ end-of-course reflections showed the majority of the 27 students valuing their role as learner-curator. One of the students mentioned: “Alternating reading and assignments that required contributing to the Learner-Curated Knowledge Base made the course bright and exciting. [this activity] is a very powerful tool for engaging students. At first sight it seemed to me like a simple task … to share some articles or other sources related to a particular topic. However, I changed my mind when I spent more than two hours finding a good article or informative video to curate. I went through several articles and chapters from different textbooks. I watched many YouTube videos related to the topic. As a result, I got familiar with the entire topic and introduced myself to many opinions from different sources regarding this topic.” Another student emphasized that the learner-curated knowledge activity in Scoop.it “was a necessary complement to discussion board in Blackboard [the LMS used in class] by integrating more multimedia resources, enriching online interactions, and better accommodating different learning styles.” A few students reported that in the beginning it was hard to work with Scoop.it because of usability and navigation issues.

Conclusions

In sum, today’s learners have a myriad of content sources at their disposal for refinement and mash-up. Being able to compile, scrutinize and recommend content is as important as creating it. This study preliminary results demonstrated that Scoop.it commenting and curating features supported information exchange and learners’ curiosity and willingness to discuss with their peers.

References


