

Appendix 6 Creating effective summaries

Adapted with permission from Nancy White

<http://www.fullcirc.com>

Online discussion boards/forums, email lists and blogging often suffer from too much volume. This has been labelled the 'tyranny of recency over relevancy'. The most recent post or message is the one that gets attention. In discussion boards, even threads highly focused and on topic, gems quickly get buried and action items forgotten. Important side topics either dominate or die. Critical blog posts get lost in archives. This creates the need for systems to harvest or organise information, gems, action items and decisions. Two possible options are creating summaries and creating indexes.

Who does this work?

This 'harvester' role often falls to the facilitator. In larger communities or diverse, multi-threaded situations, this is rarely an achievable option because of volume, and the work needs to be spread between more people.

Purpose

Before you start to harvest, think about the following questions:

- Who will use the summaries or indexes?
- How will they use the summaries?
- What is the desired action outcome from summaries?
- Where will they reside (resources, summary page, etc.)?
- Is there a tag or category associated with the material you will be working with?

It is important to recognise that summarisation can be both useful and harmful. A summary can often stop a conversation. It can create the sense of closure prematurely. It can misrepresent the conversation and cause alienation. So think carefully about not just why you are summarising, but when!

Timeliness

If you have ever tried to summarise a hot and heavy thread after a week or a month, you know what a daunting challenge that can be. The longer you delay summarising, the harder it can be. It is often good to keep up daily in heavy discussions, regardless if they are in a forum, email list or blog. Keep notes in a separate word file; use a wiki or

other tool where you can copy and save useful snippets from the conversations.

Content

Based on your determined purpose, there are a number of content approaches you might take, including:

- summary of discussion;
- analysis of tagged items;
- action plan updates;
- list of outstanding discussion or action items;
- lists of insights, techniques or issues;
- leading questions for next phase/discussion;
- direct hot-links to key postings (index);
- text analysis; and
- analysis of who contributed, frequency, etc. to capture the interaction process.

Some online interaction spaces have protocols for participants, which aids in the creation of summaries and searching for content. Participants can be asked to annotate each of their postings with key words or tags, or to provide a 'title' for their post. Then harvesters can more easily skim or search through material for relevant citations. If your software tool has tags, check to see if there is an RSS feed of the tags that you can follow. This allows you to see the material in a topical, rather than strictly chronological, view.

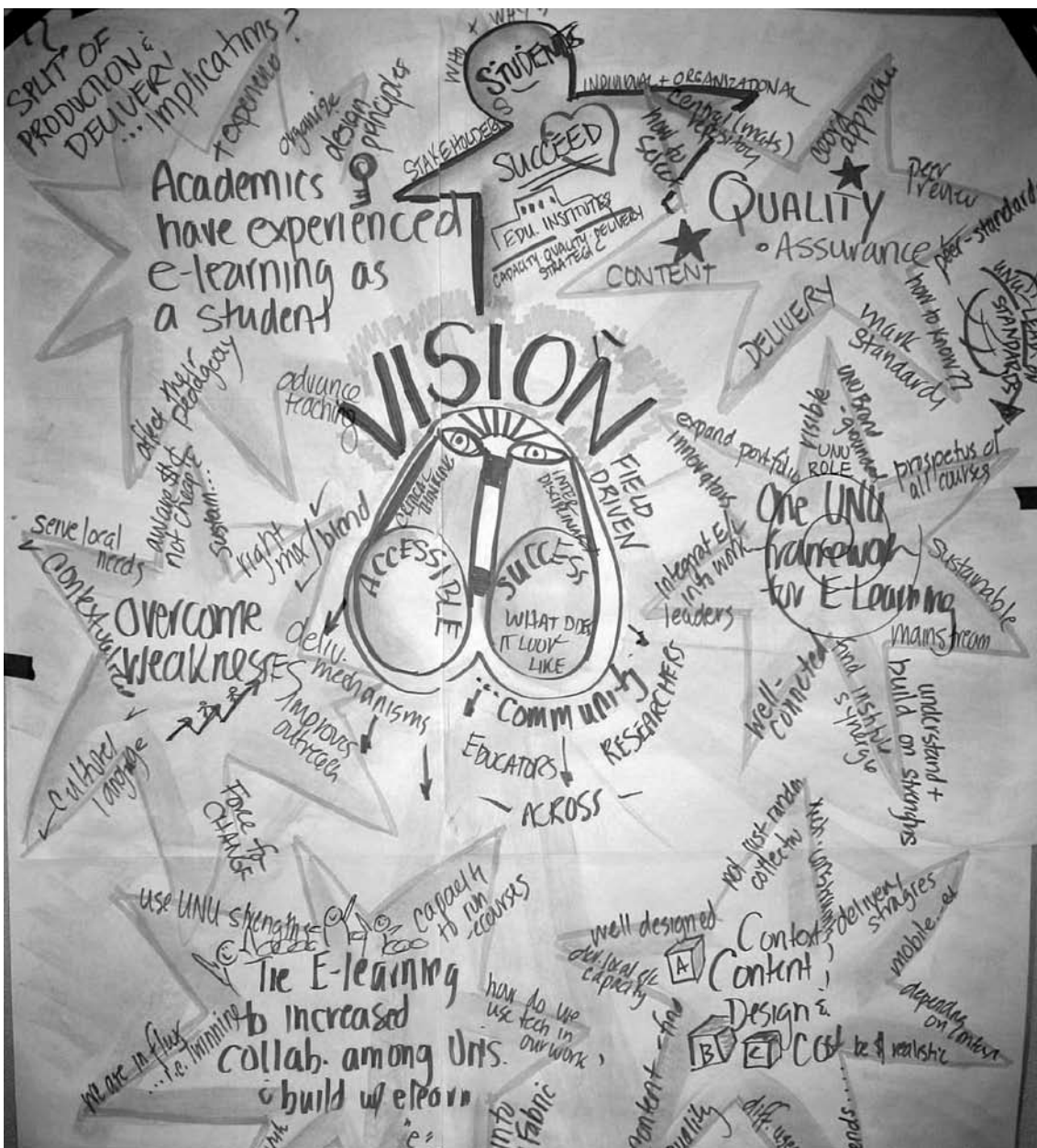
Process and presentation

Summarisation forms include the following:

- **Harvesting** – Extracting information from conversations. This might be harvesting tasks, specific information or even responses to questions. It is straight collection of information (vs. synthesis).
- **Weaving** – Looking for and linking relevant information, thoughts or comments between different conversations. This helps build coherence when there are multiple conversations and helps connect subgroups at opportune moments. Links between relevant threads support connection.
- **Summarising** – Regular recaps done during online interactions, which provide overviews and synthesis of conversations. These help reinforce work, ideas and processes and help to build stronger groups. They allow people to 'catch up' if they have fallen behind without reading 'everything'!

- Holding questions** – Tracking comments or questions that need follow-up or answering but which have no current available answer. Resurface them at the right time or place. Unanswered questions can make people feel unheard, even if there is no current available answer. By ‘holding’ them, you not only have an action follow-up mechanism, but a way of letting people know they were ‘heard’.

Summaries and indexes are often text-based, but you have other options. Visual forms such as mind-maps, electronic files of graphic recording summaries or even conceptual sketches can be very useful. The expression of ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ is often true online. Visual summaries can also be easier to grasp for those working in a second language. The images provide contextual and cultural ‘hints’ that can be useful. Below is an example:



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