

## **Community, Conversation and Collaboration: Experiences gained through working on postgraduate online distance education programmes**

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**Abstract.** This paper takes the position that community, collaboration and conversation are essential elements of the success of the MA ICT and Education at Leeds. We feel that successful design and delivery of an e-learning programme not only requires subject matter expertise and/or technical skills, but that pedagogical, information and communication skills to manage and facilitate online learning are also needed. The discussion is largely focussed on the merits of synchronous for the MA ICT in Education programme offered by the University of Leeds and this is compared to previous experiences of providing asynchronous communication tools for postgraduate distance education students.

### **Introduction**

Despite its potential, educational technology is not always used to its full potential within Higher Education (HE), and as a consequence, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a educational tool remains greatly under-utilised in this context [1]. Problems and barriers experienced by Distance Education (DE) students include factors such as: costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of experience, and training [2]. Concurring with this view, it seems that support may be one of the most critical factors for the success of DE [3]. Isolation, which results from the physical separation, different time schedules and diverse learning paces, is inherent in DE models, and consequently support for distance learners must not be overlooked when designing and planning distance programs [3], i.e. academic, pastoral, subject matter and technical assistance.

This paper reports primarily on an established programme, offered as both a full-time programme to face-to-face (f2f) students based in the University of Leeds and as a part-time programme for DE learners who may be located anywhere in the world. Working on this programme will be contrasted with other past experiences of where lessons were learned.

This paper takes the position that community, collaboration and conversation are essential elements of the success of the MA ICT and Education at Leeds. This online programme is built around integral student-student interaction and discussions. To ensure that this is successful, the tutors invest considerable time and effort into building relationships and community. Looking at the course statistics and monitoring for the programme over a period of time, it can be seen that this particular course has a very low attrition rate, losing very few of its distance students, and those that do withdraw usually do so because of overwhelming personal circumstances rather than lack of motivation to study. Furthermore, the average assignment grades tend to be good with most students receiving marks in the 'merit' or 'distinction' bands. These two factors – low attrition and high grades – indicate that this is a thriving programme.

### **Context of the MA ICT and Education**

This is an online programme in which both f2f and distance learners are treated as a single cohort and are therefore taught and assessed together. The programme consists of four taught modules and a dissertation. Each module is taught over a twelve-week period and is formally structured into weekly units. Each unit consists of a set of notes – text and/or audio, synchronous online seminars and assigned readings and/or activities. For each module, students write an assignment of 6,000 words. The cohort includes both UK/EU and international students, thus there is a mixture of students with English as a first and English as an additional language. In addition to students registered on the MA ICT and Education, the teaching cohort includes students taking ICT modules as electives within their own MA programme.

### **Principles**

Pedagogical models for online learning are usually chosen on the premise that the delivery mode is at least in part based on some sort of learning technology and that the target audience are to some extent capable of independent learning [4]. We feel, the successful design and delivery of an e-learning programme does not simply depend on selecting a tutoring team with subject matter expertise and/or technical skills, but that tutors require pedagogical, information and communication skills to manage and facilitate online learning [5].

Our approach to teaching the MA ICT and Education is based on beliefs in situated, socially constructed and mediated learning. We also believe in an active, constructionist approach to learning in which students learn by making – whether this be by means of working through modelling programs or writing reviews of papers

that they have read. Other important principles that underpin the programme are the need to build confidence in the students as academic learners and nurturing a belief in the value of reflective learning. Thus, we believe that in addition to fostering a certain level of learner independence, students learn most effectively when they are able to work collaboratively and scaffold each other through discussion of ideas and this is encouraged through the programme.

Some of these principles can be difficult to put into practice in online learning contexts, especially with distance learners who have to do much of their study in isolation. Consequently, an early aim of the programme delivery has to be the creation of a supportive and sustainable community that enables social scaffolding and reduces isolation.

### **The value of synchronous seminars**

As this is a programme in 'ICT and Education' that covers topics such as principles and practice of e-learning, an important secondary aim of the delivery is to enable students to become familiar with techniques of managing and facilitating online delivery. One of the main ways in which the programme builds community and confidence is through the timetabled synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) seminars. Attendance at these is a clear expectation and this gives the programme momentum. Students need to have read the course material before the seminar (or, at least, to have skimmed it) in order to participate in the discussion.

The regular synchronous seminars enable students to develop a sense of community, of genuinely knowing each other. For example, a student who looked at the CMC for her dissertation [6] found that students believed:

- They had developed friendships with other students through CMC
- CMC created a familiar environment for relationship development
- They knew about some of the daily concerns of their classmates

The seminars tend to begin and end with a period of social conversation and this, despite being 'off-task' in terms of the learning aims, plays a strong role in the development of community. Figure 1 provides an example of this social talk.

**Janet Roberts:** Hi Dave, good break?  
**David Johnson:** Hello all - yes nice break thanks - you?  
**Ioanna Papadis:** It was great but it is nice to be back  
**Janet Roberts:** Busy, too much work - not this type, job type, deadlines looming, but good to have the children at home.  
**David Johnson:** too keen Ionna!  
**David Johnson:** got that to look forward to Janet  
**David Johnson:** the kids I mean  
**Janet Roberts:** What deadlines or children?  
**David Johnson:** child!  
**Janet Roberts:** Beat me to it  
**David Johnson:** lol

**Figure 1: Social conversation**

This relationship-building means that students develop a sense of commitment to the community of learners and feel that they will be missed or will be 'letting people down' if they do not attend a scheduled seminar. As mentioned earlier, the MA ICT in Education has a very low attrition rate for a distance programme and we feel this may well be due to the strength of community built during the synchronous seminars.

### **Student managed small groups**

In order to manage the synchronous discussions effectively, students are split into small groups for each session. This is a process which has evolved over several years. In the early years of the programme, all participants were in one chat room together but some students found it hard to participate because of the size of the group. The first attempts at small group discussions involved students being allocated to groups in advance. This was not particularly successful as a way of forming groups because, although students are committed to the seminars, it is never completely certain that any specific individual will attend. Furthermore, because each module offers two seminar times, students may attend different sessions each week. This can make it difficult for a tutor to plan groups in advance. Now, students are allocated to groups about ten minutes after the beginning of a session – much as would happen in a face-to face class. Tutors try to vary the composition of the groups so that students can get to know different people and also to make sure that there is a mix of males/females and different language abilities in a group.

An analysis of the small groups, in comparison with sessions where the class had not been split found, however, that the tutor was less likely to intervene in small groups than in a large class [7]. In fact, when the class had not been split, the tutor had a tendency to dominate the conversation. Furthermore, in smaller groups, 'quiet' students were far more likely to participate. It should be noted there that there are many reasons why a student might be 'quiet' in a CMC discussion – natural inclination, poor internet connection, lack of typing skills, low confidence in language or knowledge and disability. The way that small groups appear to support 'quiet' students is therefore important in terms of inclusion. A student who evaluated the MA for her dissertation [8] found that students made these comments about small group discussions:

- "...more friendly and everyone was able to offer something to the conversation"
- "I felt more confident to offer suggestions in a smaller group"
- "It wasn't as intimidating"
- "I have more chances to participate fully"

However, it cannot be assumed that students will automatically engage in productive learning conversations. It seems that children's classroom dialogue was most effective when it involved 'exploratory talk' and we apply this principle to the adult students on the MA programme [9]. For this kind of talk to occur, ideas need to be offered, challenged, justified, clarified and developed. Three main aspects of CMC facilitation that would support high-quality discussion have been identified [10]:

- *Management* – this includes maintaining the focus of the discussion and keeping participants on task. Where necessary it also includes discouraging potentially

disruptive behaviour such as ‘shouting’ (excessive use of capitals) or overlong turns.

- *Community Building* - this entails the creation and maintenance of a ‘safe space’ for discussion. This function includes welcoming participants as they join the discussion, validating group members for useful contributions and drawing in ‘quieter’ members.
- *Argumentation* – this is the set of skills needed for encouraging ‘exploratory talk’ which have been described as ‘challenges’ (inviting people to justify their viewpoints), ‘checks’ (asking for clarification) and ‘counters’ (encouraging or developing counter-arguments) [11].

Most literature about CMC in education assumes that facilitation is the responsibility of the tutor. However, on the MA ICT and Education we believe that facilitation of the discussion is a collective responsibility although, of course, the tutor maintains an overview of the discussions and intervenes if necessary. To develop this process of collective facilitation, students are made aware of the qualities of ‘exploratory talk’ at an early stage in the programme and participate in a role play exercise in which each student takes on one aspect of facilitation. Students are challenged by the need to focus a specific facilitation role whilst contributing to the discussion but it is effective in raising their awareness of facilitation. An early form of this exercise with several roles has been previously tested [10] but in its current form we focus on the three aspects listed above.

Once students have become aware of the skills necessary for effective discussion, each of the breakout groups is led by one individual who takes the role of ‘manager’. This person has primary responsibility for the facilitation of their particular group during that session. Although there is a nominated leader, it is emphasised that effective facilitation is a collaborative process. Other students will take responsibility of ‘rapporteur’ to summarise the group discussion – either in a short plenary or afterwards in an asynchronous conference for all class members to read. An example of this rapporteur role can be seen in Figure 2 where one of the students has taken on the task of summarising the group discussion about the role of an e-moderator in the plenary room to be shared with the other breakout groups in that particular session.

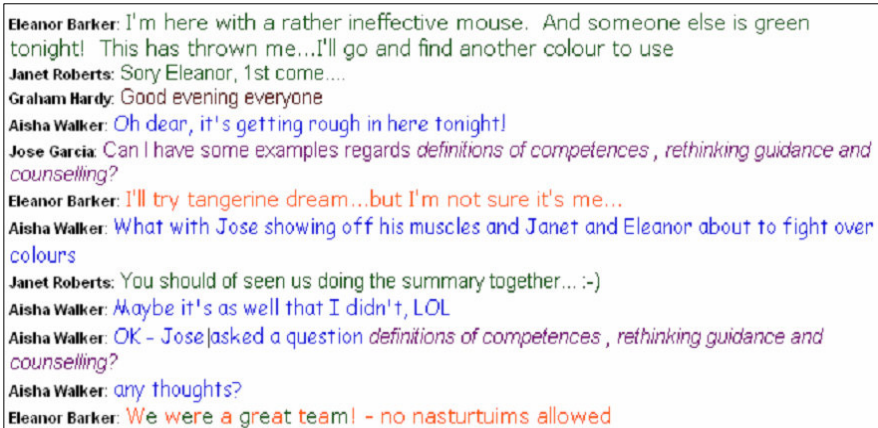
**Maggie McPherson [19:49:35]: Yellow Room Group - what is your preferred term for person leading CMC?**  
**Anne Freeman [19:49:39]:** Leo? :o)  
**Daria Kostakis [19:49:58]:** Paste what you wrote Anne!  
**Anne Freeman [19:50:01]:** We found it tricky to allocate one definitive term for the person leading CMC discussions, because each word (leader, tutor, mentor, moderator, and facilitator) has further connotations. However, the democratic Yellow Group (!) had a majority vote for **facilitator**. Even though we came to agree on this, we think that the person ultimately responsible has to wear one or more of many different hats, dependent on the philosophy, the learners, the subject, the method of CMC, etc.

Figure 2: Example of reporting summary of group discussions to plenary

## Tools and spaces

At the moment, the MA ICT in Education is delivered through FirstClass™. This environment has a desktop client which means that it is extremely easy to create new ‘conferences’ (asynchronous discussion spaces) for both tutors and students. In addition to conferences, chat rooms and folders, the FirstClass tools include shared documents which students can use for asynchronous collaborative writing. These documents are used for sharing resources, writing summaries and developing ideas.

In the synchronous chat rooms FirstClass allows participants to choose their own fonts and text colours and to paste pictures into the discussion. There is also a facility for audio contributions but this is rarely used as only one person can speak at a time. Text CMC also allows participants to review the discussion after the event; this is far more difficult with FirstClass audio chat. Text colours and fonts, however, have become an important element in the group ‘norming’ [12] in which students establish their own identities within the group. Students become quite attached to their own fonts and colours as Figure 3 shows. This figure also shows a strong culture of playfulness within the group – a sign that participants feel safe and comfortable together.



Eleanor Barker: I'm here with a rather ineffective mouse. And someone else is green tonight! This has thrown me...I'll go and find another colour to use  
Janet Roberts: Sorry Eleanor, 1st come....  
Graham Hardy: Good evening everyone  
Aisha Walker: Oh dear, it's getting rough in here tonight!  
Jose Garcia: Can I have some examples regards definitions of competences , rethinking guidance and counselling?  
Eleanor Barker: I'll try tangerine dream...but I'm not sure it's me...  
Aisha Walker: What with Jose showing off his muscles and Janet and Eleanor about to fight over colours  
Janet Roberts: You should of seen us doing the summary together... :-)  
Aisha Walker: Maybe it's as well that I didn't, LOL  
Aisha Walker: OK - Jose asked a question definitions of competences , rethinking guidance and counselling?  
Aisha Walker: any thoughts?  
Eleanor Barker: We were a great team! - no nasturtuims allowed

Figure 3: Colours and playfulness

When students log onto FirstClass they see a desktop which offers a range of communication spaces. Some of these are module specific but others are available to all students on the programme including elective students. The cross-programme conferences are either informational (such as ‘General Resources’, ‘Assignment Bank’) or social (‘Coffee Room’, ‘Student Common Room’). Some are available to tutors whilst others are only for students. An aim of the cross-programme conferences is to contribute to a sense, for the students, of belonging to the programme and hence to the university. We agree with the assertion made by Galusha [2] that DE students can indeed feel disconnected from the institution and from other students. This can result in missing out on the sharing of ideas and

resources that is common amongst face-to-face students. The programme has therefore included spaces which are essentially non-academic in nature to bring the whole cohort together in a social context. For example, recent discussions in the 'Coffee-room' – a space shared by students and tutors, have included job vacancies, conferences and recommendations for books or programs. Most of these have been initiated and continued by students. This clearly contrasts with a previous experience of providing an asynchronous Virtual Social Space [3] which was not accompanied by the regular synchronous weekly meetings, and direct contact between students was limited. Students expected this space to be popular, dynamic and changing, but due to the nature of the cohort visits were sparse and finding anybody online was unlikely:

“The VSS as a social space is akin to sitting alone in a bar with no atmosphere drinking diet Tango and, just before you leave, jot a cryptic message to say that you have been there on a post it note and stick it on the fruit machine. - a bit sad really.”

The three spaces that are designated as student-only are the 'Student Common Room' and the 'Assignment Bank' and 'External Examiner'. The 'Student Common Room' was originally created at the request of students and was called 'Moaning about Assignments' (the students asked for a place in which they could moan about the assignments). At the beginning of this year, the room was renamed 'Student Common Room' because the course co-ordinator felt squeamish about having a space called 'Moaning about Assignments' and was worried that it encouraged moaning. Interestingly, however, the room was well-used under its previous title but since being renamed has seen little activity. This is because with the previous title, the space had a clear purpose whereas students do not see a difference between 'Coffee Room' and 'Student Common Room' and do not see the point of the latter.

The 'Assignment Bank' is a space where students can upload their own completed and marked assignments for other students to read. This space was created in response to several student comments about how useful it would be to see models of successful assignments. Assignments are uploaded to the bank entirely by choice and students are free to decide how much or little they reveal about grade and feedback. Interestingly, this space also contains some questions and discussion about the assignments that have been contributed. It should be noted that all the assignments for this programme involve reflection on individual experience which, we hope, makes it difficult for students' to plagiarise each other's work. Student grade averages on this programme tend to be high and this may be due in part to the personal and reflective nature of the assignments and also to the level of support that students give to each other. Some students form study partnerships or groups to encourage and help each other through assignments or dissertations.

Much literature about communities and learning draws on Lave and Wenger's concept of 'Communities of Practice' [13]. The way in which this idea is used to refer to any groups of learners is critiqued [14] and suggests that it may be appropriate to look at learning and community firstly in terms of the 'social semiotic spaces' in which learners meet and create meaning. These spaces may, in time, develop into 'affinity spaces' in which learners develop relationships. The social and playful interactions in the synchronous seminars and the way that students are using the 'Coffee Room' and 'Assignment Bank' (and, indeed, the early 'Moaning about

Assignments' conference) show that affinity spaces have developed within the MA ICT and Education.

## Conclusions

The University of Leeds MA ICT and Education programme is a successful course with a strong sense of community. This is developed through frequent, scheduled synchronous seminars managed by students. This collaborative facilitation of the seminars gives students a strong sense of ownership of their discussion spaces. Relationship-building is also supported by a discussion tool which allows individuality and playfulness. Students are allowed social spaces which are not used by tutors in which they can and do talk about their work. However, community interactions also occur within spaces shared with tutors. Social interactions cross module boundaries showing that students experience the programme and its members as a coherent whole.

It should be recognised, however that the building of relationships and affinity requires effort on the part of tutors. The use of student managed small groups also needs tutors who are willing to 'sit on their hands' and allow students to take responsibility for facilitation. Although it may appear that the tutor is not doing much in the seminars in fact, the tutor needs to keep a close eye on several simultaneous groups in order to ensure that the collective facilitation is working effectively. If it is not, then the tutor has to intervene sensitively to support high-quality discussion without undermining the student facilitator.

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