

Key Issues

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Jacquie Kelly
MLE/VLE Manager
JISC infoNet
jacquie.kelly@northumbria.ac.uk

JISC Centre of Expertise in the Planning
& Implementation of Information Systems

Northumbria University
Technopole Building
Kings Manor
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 6PA

Tel: +44 (0)191 227 3074
Fax: +44 (0)191 227 4768

Email: jiscinfonet@northumbria.ac.uk

On-line Discussions

Making them work for you

Collaborative dialogue and communication with tutors and peers are major contributors towards successful learning. With clear design and planning, on-line discussions can facilitate this communication.

Of interest to:

Lecturers, tutors, ICT / staff development advisors in FE and HE

The majority, if not all, VLEs include communication tools and many tutors and learners wish to use them as an integral part of the learning and teaching.

Some tutors are unsure about using this technology. To enable a wider take-up, this document gives guidance on the use of these tools in teaching and learning.

Many tutors have documented their experiences; this is an attempt at bringing some of this together with the author's own experience.

A case study from Northumbria University is used to exemplify the guidance.

The use of online discussions can enhance the learning experience of students and encourage collaborative learning.

As with any teaching, the activities need to be planned and managed. Contrary to some fears, the tutor is still very much involved in these activities.

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On-line Discussions

The majority of, if not all, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) have communication tools as part of their 'bag of tricks'. Most distance learning, and many face-to-face courses, will use on-line discussions to support student learning (whatever the format of the material and documentation).

Many tutors have documented their experience, and the experience of their students, in using such tools, and so there is a wealth of advice to be found. This document is an attempt to bring together some of this experience together with the author's own experience of using on-line asynchronous discussions with distance and campus-based learners.

1. Definitions

Asynchronous discussions do not happen in real-time; people can communicate using the same (virtual) space / system but not necessarily at the same time. E-mail is an example of asynchronous communication, discussions boards are another. There is a delay between a user reading a message and responding to that message and this delay does have enormous advantages in some circumstances.

Synchronous discussions happen in real-time; all the participants must be in the same (virtual or real) place at the same time. Electronic chat rooms are a good example. Again there are advantages to this 'face-to-face' communication. They are mostly used in support of distance learners where location is a physical constraint, but where face-to-face meetings / tuition is important.

Asynchronous and synchronous discussions each have their place in learning support and are not mutually exclusive.

2. Asynchronous Discussions

As previously mentioned, there are advantages to using asynchronous discussions in teaching and learning. The delay in response allows the contributor (tutor and learner alike) time to consider their response – to consider the terminology that they use, to tidy their response (format & spell checked), to further research before posting and time to think through the response. This can lead to more mature responses that further support the learning process for the contributor and other members of the group.

The removal of the time barrier opens up the discussions to a wider audience. Many distance and part time learners have varying, unpredictable study patterns that are dictated by outside influences such as work and home life. These influences are potential barriers to participation in synchronous discussion groups.

2.1. Contributions

Research (OTLNEWSLETTER – August 29, 2000) has shown that the majority (90%) of students are comfortable with participating in on-line discussions as opposed to contributing to a face-to-face lecture (50%).

Students have more confidence in contributing to on-line discussions because of the time allowed for preparation of their contribution. This is particularly true for students whose first language is not English; many of these students are very active within on-line groups but few would contribute to face-to-face class discussions.

Of course, not all students will contribute to on-line asynchronous discussions in the same way as not all students contribute in traditional classes. However, most of these vicarious learners (or lurkers as they are often known) are still learning. They read and consider the

contributions from the other students and this will add to their understanding of the topics. However, their understanding and development is not usually as great as those contributing.

Encouraging students to discuss ideas, not just post opinions, may be difficult. There are various tactics for overcoming this problem. For example, the tutor can encourage by asking questions about an opinion; asking for justification of an opinion but in a non-threatening way.

2.2. Assessing Contributions

Some tutors are very concerned about students who do not contribute and so attempt to make the contributions compulsory by attaching marks to discussions. This is not normal practice in a classroom, so perhaps should be avoided in on-line discussions. Practitioners are not in agreement on this matter. Students can be contacted and reasons for not contributing discussed; it is often a matter of confidence. It is an aim of our education system to encourage active learning, but as many students are assessment driven, there is no one way, or easy answer to achieving this aim.

If, however, assessment is important, one approach may be to assess the students' understanding of the discussion, rather than the contributions themselves. Students can be asked to summarise the discussions, either individually or in a group and it is these summaries that are assessed. The summaries can be posted on the discussion board as a conclusion to the topic and so further aid the learning process.

2.3. Encouraging contributions

Asynchronous discussions do not just happen! If they are a part of the stated teaching and learning strategy for the unit, then they should be carefully planned and managed by the tutor. Tutor management does not necessarily mean tutor control or dominance. If used more informally, it is perhaps wise for the tutor to at least monitor and occasionally contribute so that there is no abuse of the facilities.

Details of case study 1 are given in appendix 1. The students in this case were new lecturers taking a Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice. The tool being used for the on-line discussions was Outlook Public Folders – a rather cumbersome tool by today's standards. The tutor encouraged contributions by asking each participant to post an introduction to themselves, having posted his own. Some students knew each other quite well from some of the group work so this may have given them the confidence to contribute early. The tutor posted questions for discussion, and also contributed to the discussions. In some cases there were 'guest' contributions. The questions and guest appearance were planned. This planning and managing is now considered to be good practice. McLoughlin and Oliver (1998) argue that participation in learning hinges on communication and dialogue between teacher and student or among peers.

The analysis showed that some learners were frequent contributors, and some did not contribute at all. Some students took a while to post their first contribution – almost testing the water. On-line discussions are public and permanent (to the group) and this may be a reason why some students are hesitant; others feel that although the postings are public, they feel anonymous and this gives them confidence. Previous use of technology was not a factor. Outlook Public Folders does not have the facility to check on access, so it is not known whether those not contributing were reading the discussions.

It is important to limit the time for each discussion topic. The time allowed should be related to the topic, and the mode of study. Some topics may require additional research or reading, others will be based upon material previously presented. Part time students and distance learners may require slightly longer than full time students. If the time allowed is too long, then some contributions may become 'mini essays', rather than discussions and so the excitement and liveliness of the debate may be lost.

Tutors must be aware of how their contributions can affect the students. For instance, there should be no public criticism of a student's contribution (unless the student is abusing the facility). Tutors should time their contributions carefully so as to not impede the collaboration between the learners. However, many learners feel that if no reply is given to their contribution, then they are being isolated or ignored because their contribution was wrong in some way.

2.4. Facilitating Group Work

Part time students frequently complain if group work requires meeting outside scheduled timeslots. This is due, in the main, to problems of distance and time.

Some requirements of group work are the exchange of ideas and a discussion based on the topic that can lead to the development of ideas. Often members of the group will exchange documents (papers and diagrams that they have produced as well as research papers) and URLs. These discussions are private to the group and confidentiality is frequently an agreed group ethic. The tutor may act as facilitator or advisor. All these requirements can be met by on-line discussions.

There are many advantages of asynchronous e-group (online group) work. The asynchronous aspect overcomes schedule-coordination problems. An account of the contributions is kept to enable documented monitoring of progress; this can be used to aid the grading of individual contributions to the group's work. Asynchronous discussion is inclusive; no one member is excluded by dominant group members and so there is a sense of equality. 'Rehearsal' is allowed and this can increase an individual's confidence as well as allowing more mature, considered contributions. There is time to think before acting. These two last points lead to an increased quality in the contributions.

Online discussions do not necessarily exclude face-to-face group meetings if these are appropriate. In this case the students should be encouraged to post a report of the meeting onto the discussion board for the benefit of the tutor and group members who could not be present. This will also act as an aide-memoire for those who attended the meeting.

2.5. How to get students engaged in online group work

This can be slow if it is the students' first engagement with this type of group work.

Some suggestions are:

- Require participation, i.e. attach marks! It is unfortunate, but many students are assessment driven.
- Use the term ' Learning Teams' rather than 'Group Work' to emphasise the learning aspects.
- Place an emphasis on learning and collaboration.
- Set up a private area for each team. Include the tutor in the team to indicate support, rather than policing; but remind the students to abide by University regulations.
- Don't settle for opinions; encourage discussion rather than the one-off posting of opinions.
- Encourage creative thought, analysis, explanation
- A 'guest' tutor can stimulate the discussions.
- Nominate a student to provide a summary at the end of the discussions.

2.6. Consider the Maturity of the Learners

Gilly Salmon offers a five-stage model that leads the tutor and learner through stages in online learning (Salmon, G (2002) *activities: the key to online learning*, Kogan Page, London) . The stages correspond to the levels of technical and learning ability. A learner (and tutor!) who is new to online learning will need time and encouragement in order to feel comfortable with this medium for learning. A possible sixth stage, in addition to Salmon's 5 stages, (in stage 5 – promoting and enhancing reflection - Salmon does not explicitly state the role of the

e-moderator) is where the learners do not wish for the involvement of a tutor. With maturity will come confidence and so a group of mature (not age, but of ability) learners may wish to run their own discussion group without the intervention of a tutor.

E-tutors (or e-moderators) often view themselves as controllers in addition to facilitators, so that the discussions are kept to within the agreed boundaries. This may inhibit some spontaneous discussions that could lead to innovation. It is recognised that much (perhaps most) learning takes place away from the classroom and the tutor in a face-to-face situation, students interspersing subject with personal conversation. Discussion boards could be used in this way, allowing students freedom of expression.

An IFTS (International Forum of Educational Technology and Society) discussion entitled 'a theory for elearning', moderator Mark Nichols, UCOL, Palmerston North, New Zealand, dated March 2003, may be of further interest.

3. Synchronous Discussions

The use in learning of synchronous discussions (Chat Room, Virtual Chat) is not as widespread as that of asynchronous discussions. Some reasons could be that tutors are less experienced, timing can be difficult to organise, and synchronous chat does require much preparation. It is also more difficult to manage large numbers of students in a room at the same time. Many students, especially 18/19yr olds, are probably more familiar with chat rooms than tutors are, although few have probably used them for school or college learning! In a learning environment it is perhaps better to use, with students, the term 'synchronous discussions' rather than 'chat room' or 'virtual chat'.

3.1. Guidelines

For a successful synchronous session there are some guidelines that tutors may find useful.

- a) Limit the numbers in a session at a time to 4 or 5. This gives a chance to all to contribute without having to wait for too long. Also, too many in a room at once can lead to multiple conversations that can be difficult to follow.
- b) Consider timing very carefully to fit in with the needs of the learners. On a distance learning or part time course this can be very difficult and learners can put great pressure on the tutor to hold sessions that are not convenient for the tutor.
- c) Publicise ground rules and the style of writing to be used. These can be agreed in a face-to-face session if possible - perhaps at an induction session. Students need to be made aware of the Institution's regulations. They are bound by these when enrolling on a course but it is good practice to remind students of their obligations before using on-line discussions.
- d) Tutors should moderate the synchronous discussion, guiding individuals who are not following the publicised guidelines.
- e) Thorough preparation is required. Questions, ideas, diagrams to discuss, web sites to visit, and timings should be considered. It is better to have too much material / ideas to hand rather than too little in order to keep the students' interests. They will not sign up for another session if the first is boring and not useful.
- f) Publicise sessions well in advance – clearly state the purpose and how they should help the student. Perhaps give some suggestions as to preparation for the session. Students can then make reasoned decisions as to which sessions to take part in. Some synchronous discussion tools have the facility for viewing the archives of previous sessions and these can then be made available to the whole group.

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- g) The first one or two sessions should be tutor-led to allow students to become confident in using the technology and in the type of learning.
 - h) A session can be followed up with email to participants concerning their individual contributions.
 - i) Synchronous discussion can be used in conjunction with asynchronous discussion, for example, to initiate/ conclude a topic, or to clarify some contribution (s).
 - j) If there are students-only discussions, then guidelines should indicate that the tutor might join for moderation purposes. The discussion is part of student learning and is using Institution facilities. Students can use a public chat room facility for general chitchat.

4. Familiarisation with the technology

It was mentioned earlier (Case Study – appendix 1) that the contributions made by the students did not depend upon previous experience with technology. Some who had not previously used such facilities were enthused by the prospects, whereas some did not engage. Other lecturers who use technology on a day-to-day basis did not contribute at all.

Documentation (on the use of the technology) should be available for those who need it. Some students are quite happy to 'hack it' - these are generally younger students – but most feel more comfortable having some brief notes to refer to. Some tutors may prefer to provide all students with full documentation.

On the other hand, tutors should be familiar and comfortable with the tools being used; the technology should not get in the way. A good way of gaining such experience is to join an on-line forum for lecturers; this could be subject, School, or Institution wide. An area can be set up for students to ask questions about the technology / process.

Part of the planning should include a contingency plan for if the technology fails. It should be remembered that it is the learning that is important not the technology.

5. Conclusion

The use of synchronous and asynchronous discussion can enhance the learning experience of students and encourage collaborative learning.

As with any teaching, the sessions must be planned and managed, and be an integral part of the unit – they are not an add-on that does not involve the tutor. This includes any discussion areas set up for a general question and answer type activity.

They can be fun – so have a go!

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IFTS (International Forum of Educational Technology and Society) discussion entitled 'a theory for elearning', moderator Mark Nichols, UCOL, Palmerston North, New Zealand, dated March 2003

Some useful societies:

ALT (Association for Learning Technology)

<http://www.alt.ac.uk>

LTSN

<http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/>

ILT

<http://www.ilt.ac.uk/>

Some useful journals:

Computers and Education

Journal of Educational technology

Educational Technology and Society

<http://ifets.ieee.org/periodical/issues.html>

Educational technology

Educational Technology and Society

Discussion Fora

<http://ifets.ieee.org/discussions/discuss.html>

Journal of Computer Assisted Learning

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/ktru/jcaljrnl.htm>

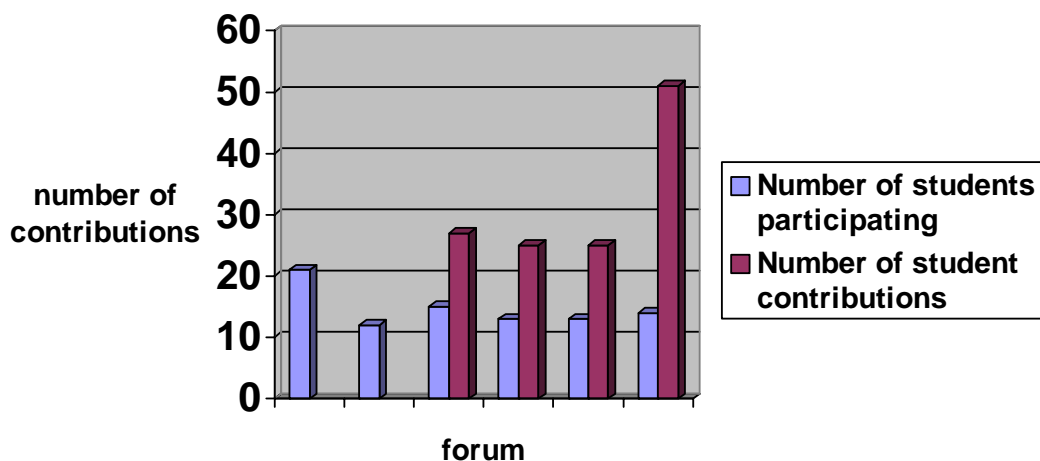
Appendix 1

Case Study 1

Use of Outlook Public Folders on Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice

Forum	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of students in group	31	31	31	31	31	31
Number of students participating	21	12	15	13	13	14
Number of student contributions	*	*	27	25	25	51
% participation	68	39	48	42	42	45
Number of tutor contributions	*	*	11	5	5	35

Student participation



Each forum was for a different discussion

* not known

Some observations

The overall usage appears to be high compared to other groups (at Northumbria and beyond). This could be due to the type of course and its students (mature students, academics, new and keen) and the nature of the discussions.

Forum 1 was for introductions. This probably explains the high contribution; although not all students participated.

In the last forum there is a high correlation between the number of contributions from students and the number from staff. There is also a higher input from guest lecturers in this forum. This would support the theory that contributions from tutors encourage participation from students.

3 students made no contribution at all to the discussions. They may have been reading the contributions, but as Outlook Public Folders has no tracking of views, this cannot be certain. This figure is low compared to other studies.

As may be expected, some students (about 9) contributed frequently.

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