Introducing Text-Based Computer Conferencing with and Accredited Academic Development Programme

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INTRODUCTION

How can an accredited academic development programme, attended by staff from a wide range of disciplines and with widely varying levels of IT experience and expertise, enhance all participants' understanding of the application of learning technologies? This is a question that the team of tutors running the Postgraduate Certificate in Post-compulsory Education at the University of Warwick are currently attempting to address. The course, known locally as the 'Warwick Teaching Certificate', has been attended by some eighty staff and postgraduate students over the past four years and has recently become a requirement of probation. Numbers participating are therefore set to rise, with over thirty likely to enrol for 2000/2001. The Certificate is co-ordinated by the Centre for Academic Practice with tutors from the Institute of Education, the Department of Continuing Education, the Senior Tutor's Office, as well as from CAP itself.

ADRESSING 'LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES'

The Centre for Academic Practice is also the base for the University's Educational Technology Service which, apart from being very active within the institution at various levels, is part of an international network and runs a number of externally funded projects. The Certificate course has benefited from this connection with ETS and has had a wealth of expertise and case study material to draw upon in addressing the application and evaluation of learning technologies.

Hitherto the approach has involved consideration of principles underlying the successful integration of learning technologies and analysis of case studies exemplifying particular applications. Valuable as this has been for participants, the diversity of subject backgrounds and widely varying levels of experience and expertise has made it difficult to develop a sense of a 'community of practitioners' who are experiencing the impact of learning technologies on their own programme and are able to support one another in developing academic practice. An obvious way to address this issue is to model learning processes (and in particular those involving communication, co-operation and collaboration) through the Certificate programme itself.

THE 'PASSIVE'/'ACTIVE' CONTINUUM

A common way of mapping applications of learning technology is in terms of the forms of participation required of the learner, considered in relation to a broad continuum from the 'passive' (where the outcomes are predetermined and the mode of communication presentational) to the 'active' (where learners have considerable autonomy and the mode of communication is a multi-faceted dialogue). The overall approach will involve modelling both ends of the passive > active continuum as well as continuing to present case study material involving various forms of 'courseware' representing the intervening sectors of the continuum. At the 'passive' end, despite the label, the emphasis will be on presentational technique which facilitates engagement -- a better term might therefore be 'active reception', with a corresponding recasting of the continuum in terms of 'receptive' and 'productive' orientations rather than passive/active. It is in relation to the productive/active mode, however, that the approach bears most directly on the theme of this issue: 'active learning on the web'. Text-based computer conferencing using software with a web interface is being employed with a view to exploiting a number of features.

- It serves authentic purposes within the Certificate programme, structured as this is around periodic 2/3 day block events involving the total learning group and occasional sub-group meetings (2/3 between each block). (Cf. McConnell, 2000, 151.)

- It is a generic tool with applications in all domains of academic practice (teaching, research, administration) and across all fields/disciplines.

- It has 'real world' currency as a tool in use in commerce, industry and the professions.

- An increasing number of documented case studies of its use in professional development is becoming available (Birchall and Smith, 1996; Salmon, 2000).

CHOICE OF SOFTWARE

Given the areas of established practice within the University, the choice lay between WebBoard and FirstClass. Both are currently in use supporting very large postgraduate programmes (the former in relation to business and management education; the latter, initial and in-service teacher training). In terms of software features, the choice was not seen as particularly significant. WebBoard was chosen as having a sufficiently comprehensive set of conferencing tools, a straightforward web interface, and, possibly (although there is no intention of undertaking a specific comparative evaluation on this point), a mode of discussion management better suited to the particular forms of interaction anticipated for the Certificate course.

TUTOR TRAINING

As the burgeoning literature on computer conferencing makes clear, the role of the tutor (or 'e-moderator') is crucial in facilitating participants' developing use of the new medium (Salmon, 1998, 2000; McConnell, 2000). Some members of the Certificate team have already experienced computer conferencing in other course contexts. The relatively small size of the total participant group (30-35) means that not all the tutors contributing to the Certificate need to have a specific 'moderating' role, particularly in the early stages. The tutors who are new to the process will initially 'observe' the participant conferences while taking part themselves in closed tutor conferences focused on course planning, evaluation and development.

DEVELOPING PARTICIPANTS

Back in 1996 Birchall and Smith were already pointing out that it 'has long been recognised' that successful exploitation of computer mediated communication requires an approach which fully integrates the new medium into course development, presentation systems, and student support. Purposes need to be clear and other general factors crucial to organisational innovation need to be present, such as 'support from the top' and a preparedness to nurture the innovation 'through the vulnerable early stages' (1996, 1). The idea of a staged approach has more recently been formalised by Gilly Salmon following research and evaluation based on the Open University Business School's distance education programmes (Salmon 1998, 2000). Salmon has set out a five stage developmental model:

- Stage one: access and motivation
- Stage two: online socialisation
- Stage three: information exchange
- Stage four: knowledge construction
- Stage five: development

It is anticipated that, for most if not all participants in the Warwick Teaching Certificate, stages one and two will be conflated. Many of the technical issues which Salmon quite rightly emphasises as requiring planned and structured attention at stage one for distance learners setting up their own connections via modems should not apply to participants who have a direct LAN connection and immediate access to support on site. Responses to a pre-course questionnaire have suggested that all participants are already experienced email users and many are subscribers to discussion lists. Rapid transition to stage three should also be facilitated by the possibility of launching the use of the conferencing system at face-to-face meetings. This said, a considerable amount of individual encouragement, most of it via email, will probably still be necessary to get participation rates to the level where the conferencing could be said to be making a significant contribution to participants' sense of belonging to a community of practitioners.

INTEGRATION

It is well known that computer conferencing does not engage the totality of any particular group: a third participating fully as both spectators and contributors; a third engaging to a degree, but

mainly as spectators; and the final third with negligible involvement (maybe never even logging on), would perhaps not be an untypical distribution. To encourage participation, online activity needs to be purposeful, authentic (in the sense of working with the characteristics of the medium) and embedded in the programme. Achieving this mix is not straightforward, as many commentators make clear (Birchall and Smith, 2000; Salmon, 2000; McConnell 2000; Stratfold 2000).

Initially, the Certificate WebBoard will have a very restricted range of conferences to make it easy for new users to orientate themselves in terms of both the basic procedural use of the software and the nature of the communication taking place. A 'common room' and a conference associated with the first module (a three-day 'face-to-face' event where the conferencing system will be demonstrated, albeit briefly) are all that will initially be presented. In the case of the first module, the conference will be used to feed back issues and responses from the evaluation of the block event, and to pick up on matters identified by participants. It is envisaged that this module will involve a transition from stage three to stage four in Salmon's scheme. As the programme progresses, other module conferences will be used both for preparatory discussion before block events and for ongoing review (with consolidation of Salmon's stage four, and transition to stage five).

At a point between the block events for the first two modules, discipline-related sub-groups will be formed (with around six participants in each sub-group). Each sub-group will be convened by a tutor at occasional face-to-face meetings and 'moderated' online by the same tutor. It is envisaged that the conferences associated with these groups will be closed and will run in parallel with the module conferences open to all participants. The high degree of focus and shared 'language' will, it is hoped, enable the sub-group conferences to move from stage four to stage five, although this will demand careful facilitation by the moderator and require appropriate 'payback' in terms of recognition within the programme and identifiable intrinsic benefits for participants.

ASSESSMENT

Perhaps the most important area in which the conferencing needs to be embedded is assessment. Those ready and willing to participate deserve, and may need, recognition; those who are less forthcoming may be influenced by a direct connection with assessment arrangements. Negotiated assessment has been an aspect of the programme's approach since its inception, with reflective writing and portfolio preparation key components. Extracts from conference discussions have clear relevance here, although it is essential to agree appropriate protocols for inclusion and attribution. A more direct link can be made for one of the modules which requires group collaboration and presentation. Conferencing will allow groups to function asynchronously and facilitate peer-review.

EVALUATION

More than one sense of evaluation will be associated with the conferencing. Conferencing itself as a medium for learning will be considered, with participants' direct experience informing discussions which will also draw on published and local case studies. The role of conferencing within the Certificate programme and its potential in participants' areas of work will both require attention. Conferencing will also be used as an evaluation tool for the programme itself, in particular to feed back outcomes from ongoing evaluations to participants ('closing the loop' as a popular 'quality enhancement' phrase has it).

Inevitably, the word most likely to echo through all these discussions is 'time': time for course tutors to test, develop and embed practice in the programme; time for participants to get involved at a level which begins to bring returns. Contact hours associated with the 'face-to-face' meetings have been adjusted in planning the new, more diversified, patterns of involvement. It is doubtful, however, that such arithmetical measures will themselves have much impact on the perceptions of participants with many competing demands on their time and good reason to be uncertain about priorities.

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