

## Assessing Online Collaborative Activity on the Warwick MBA by Distance Learning

---

**Stuart Sutherland, Warwick Business School**

This article provides an overview and a brief discussion of the approaches used to assess online collaborative activity within modules of the Warwick MBA by distance learning programme. It begins with an outline of the history of the programme and in particular of its various online developments, before moving to consider the new challenges and issues associated with the assessment of online group work.

### REDUCING THE DISTANCE - OPTIONAL COLLABORATIVE SPACES FOR DISTANCE LEARNERS

The Warwick MBA by distance learning was established in 1986 and has since grown into a substantial, internationally recognised and internationally accredited programme. It currently has over 1800 active students at different points in their studies, located in around 80 different countries worldwide, and over 2100 students have graduated from the programme since its inception.

The programme is 'delivered' principally by traditional distance learning means: each module has a set of dedicated study notes authored by Warwick academics; students are allocated tutors who provide formative feedback on assignments; there is an annual, compulsory 8 day summer school and summative assessment is typically by end of year examinations.

Such a mode of delivery and assessment provides learners with considerable flexibility and autonomy over how, when and where they study. That is of course the attraction of a distance learning programme: typically, distance learners are in full-time work or have other substantial commitments, so their part-time study needs to be able to fit around the range of demands they are faced with.

Traditionally, with this flexibility comes isolation: from academic and programme staff and from other learners. However, in the last decade, developments in online communication have presented opportunities to reduce the isolation of the distance learner. Since 1995, students on the MBA programme have had the opportunity to access a range of online communication facilities and spaces designed to encourage peer-to-peer communication, to reduce the distance between the learner and staff at Warwick.

From modest beginnings using elementary mailing list facilities to more the recently developed sophisticated discussion areas used across cohorts and by private 'virtual study groups', the entirely optional traffic passing through these systems has grown exponentially. It has given birth in some cases to a certain sense of community amongst otherwise isolated learners and the volume of online communication does bear witness to a felt need amongst elements of the student body to connect and communicate, to gain and give the sort of informal reassurance and feedback which face-to-face learners experience as the norm.

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF FULLY ONLINE MODULES

Building upon the experience advocating and running such optional online discussion spaces, since 2001 we have developed and run two modules on the distance learning MBA which have required students to engage in substantial amounts of online collaborative activity. We call these our online elective modules which students choose to study in the latter stages of their course. The two online elective modules have been available in e-business (in 2001 and 2002) and in Project Management (in 2002 and 2003). Whilst the learning resources and activities have evolved substantially on each occasion that these two modules have run, the pedagogic model has remained constant.

We developed our online modules working on the principle that the most appropriate and beneficial use of web-based technologies for international groups of postgraduate, distance learning students would lie in harnessing the technology to enable communication within activities that would promote reflection, discussion and shared learning. Thus, our online elective 'course model' has so

far been one of structured, assessed, discussion-based small group activity, facilitated by online tutors.

On all of our online modules, students are placed in deliberately internationally-mixed Virtual Teams of 5 or 6 members, which are allocated to online tutors. At 2 or 3 set points in the year Virtual Teams engage in periods of online activity for around 4 or 5 weeks. In adopting this model of online learning, we were principally driven by a desire to provide distance learners, whose study experience is traditionally solitary, with new opportunities to learn from and with each other, to engage in forms of active learning traditionally absent from the distance learning experience.

Our considerable experience of facilitating and supporting many different optional online conferences to promote student support and communication had demonstrated to us that there was a very strong desire amongst elements of our student population, for academic engagement with their distant peers. However, the move to online assessed activity requiring students to undertake common tasks, such as the production of a group report, brings with it the entirely new demands and skills of online team working and negotiation, group decision-making and task management.

Janet Macdonald captures this difference between optional conferencing and assessed online collaboration very nicely in a recent paper when she writes

*"Of course, if marks are involved for collaborative work, this is the ultimate test of mutual trust, and underlines the distinction, for some students, between the pleasure of online collaborative study and the pain of collaborative assessment."*

(Macdonald, 2003, p.387)

### **ASSESSING THE ONLINE ACTIVITY**

Within the periods of assessed online work, a typical activity will require groups to interrogate and discuss an issue or case and produce a specified group response (such as an agreed list of key points) or more a formal group report. These processes (facilitated by online tutors) and their products are assessed, with the online tutor playing a key role in the assessment.

University-wide regulations governing assessment allow that up to 40% of a learner's final assessment on a module can be gained through collaborative activity. At an early stage we decided that the range of skills required to engage in such work, and the complexity of negotiating such tasks, deserved as much credit as it could be given. So our online learners can gain up to 40% of their final credit through online activity - the remaining 60% of the assessment is gained through the submission of an individual assignment at the end of the module.

In designing the assessment regime which has been used on every run of our online modules so far, we wanted the assessment criteria to both drive and reward collaborative activity. If the assessment regime is to achieve the goal of encouraging rich, purposeful online collaboration to enhance learning, key decisions have to be made about the extent to which the processes of collaboration and the products of collaboration should be assessed.

Our current answers to these issues, our current assessment regime, are as follows. To give the collaborative activity a focus and an end point, each assessed activity concludes with the group producing an assignment of some sort. These assignments are assessed, with their marks being distributed equally amongst the members of the group. In total, half of the 40% available for online group activity is comprised of such assessments.

On its own, such an assessment of online group work is partial and, if used alone, it would be inherently unfair. It clearly does not differentiate between the efforts of the different members of the group, nor does it encourage or reward the skills involved in engaging in online collaborative activity. Therefore, an additional, crucial element of our assessment regime is the assessment of individuals on the quality of their performance as a member of an online group. A grade, comprising the other half of the 40% available for online group work, is given to each individual by their online tutor.

In assessing the quality of an individual's performance as a member of an online group, it is not only the quality of their individual insights and postings which is assessed; it is also the quality of their performance as a team member. To conduct this assessment, at the end of each period of online group work, online tutors grade their tutees using a series of assessment criteria which, at every level, place a value upon

- the quality of the learner's individual contributions
- the quality of the learner's engagement with, and responsiveness to, the contributions of fellow group members
- the quality the learner's contribution to the organisation of the group.

The assessment criteria used by tutors are included as [Appendix A](#) and the overall assessment regime is described in Table 1, below.

Assessed Activity	Value	Description
Online collaborative activity (group)	20%	Grades are awarded for the products of collaborative activity and divided equally amongst group members.
Online collaborative activity (individual)	20%	Individuals are awarded grades by their online tutor for the quality of their performance as a member of an online group
Individual	60%	A final individual assignment is submitted after the periods of online activity are finished

*Table 1: An overview of the assessment regime used in online MBA modules*

It should be noted that such assessment by online tutors of the activity of online learners, which has taken place within a computer conferencing environment, has a clear advantage over the assessment of face-to-face group work, in that the online discussion space provides a clear written record of the interactions between learners, a 'public' body of evidence upon which to base judgements. Thus, the contributions of individuals and the process of collaboration, which the tutor is tasked with assessing, are more transparent than they may have been in a face-to-face environment and thus the fairness of the tutor's assessment is potentially easier to establish.

In terms of fairness, it might be argued that by sharing out the grades for the products of collaboration equally amongst group members, a learner could potentially acquire a usable grade with minimal input into the work of the group. We guard against this scenario by clearly establishing minimum levels of participation, below which learners are removed from the course altogether, by providing credit for high quality participation and by having tutors facilitate and prompt and encourage the fullest participation possible.

Indeed, in our view of online collaborative learning, it is a vital part of the role of the tutor to model and encourage the behaviour which elements of our assessment regime reward. In practice, these are a range of 'soft' and online organisational skills ranging from tone of voice to the simple injunction to a group of online learners that they rotate roles within the group over time. As our MBA distance learners have moved from participating in optional online conferences to participating in assessed online collaboration, the role of the online tutor becomes vital in providing formative feedback (prior to summative assessment) and in encouraging appropriate modes of online working, so that, to use Janet Macdonald's terminology, the pleasures of online collaborative study are enhanced and the pains of collaborative assessment are eased.

### ISSUES ARISING

The above describes some of the rationale and the approach we have adopted in developing the assessment of online collaborative learning within our distance learning MBA. It is clearly not a perfect system and its adoption raises a number of interesting and difficult issues and questions. I would like to finish by simply listing some of these issues and questions.

Firstly, an ongoing issue which faces all designers of online collaborative learning is that of how

and where one's learners are given the opportunity to develop the key skills required of them by this form of online learning and its assessment criteria. If credit is to be given for the performance of such skills, then course design needs to provide learners with opportunities to gradually develop the requisite skills.

Secondly, an important consideration for us in developing online modules for distance learning MBA students was the fact that assessed online activity - in effect, a new form of continuous assessment - necessarily compromises the traditional flexibility of the distance learner. No longer does this part-time, remote learner have the autonomy to decide when and how to study, when they are required to participate in online groups tasked with meeting a number of regular deadlines. Within the online module itself, where the collaboration takes place asynchronously via computer conferencing, there is a substantial degree of flexibility to engage in group work from places and at times of one's choosing. However, within the overall context of a distance learning programme, the pleasures of online collaborative activity are traded off against a reduction in the learner's 'normal' flexibility.

Thirdly, while the balance described above, between the (equally shared) assessment of the product of collaboration and the (individually graded) assessment of the process of collaboration has considerable merits and benefits, we would like in future to explore ways in which self and peer assessment of online group work might offer greater fairness and incentives to online learners. Face-to-face variants of our MBA modules frequently conduct group assessment by providing an overall grade for the product of group work and then inviting group members to distribute the grade amongst themselves based upon their respective roles and inputs. At a very early stage in planning our online modules we decided that such a process would be very difficult to conduct online. We felt that the precise and intimate exchanges required to negotiate such decisions are perhaps best conducted in real time and face-to-face. If they were to be conducted asynchronously we judged that the inherent tensions of such negotiations would simply be exacerbated. (Gee, Yamashiro and Lee, 2000 certainly report evidence of such difficulties.) However, we are currently attracted by an online system developed in Australia entitled SPARK (the self and peer assessment resource kit) which enables such decisions to be staged with attractive levels of confidentiality and fairness. (See Freeman and McKenzie, 2001, for an account of SPARK and some online material about this system can be found at <http://ntweb1.itd.uts.edu.au/spark/StaffLBOD.html>.)

---

### Stuart Sutherland

Learning Resources Development Unit  
Warwick Business School,  
University of Warwick

**To discuss any issues raised by this article please contact CAP tel: 024 7652 4766 email: [cap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:cap@warwick.ac.uk)**

---

### REFERENCES

Freeman, M. A, McKenzie, J. (2001). Aligning peer assessment with peer learning in large classes: The case for an online self and peer assessment system, Boud, D., Cohen, R., Sampson, E. (eds.), *Peer Learning in Higher Education*, pp. 156 - 169, London: Kogan Page.

Gee, X., Yamashiro, A., Lee, J. (2000). Pre-class planning to scaffold students for online collaborative learning activities. *Educational Technology & Society* 3(3).

Macdonald, J. (2003), Assessing online collaborative learning: process and product, *Computers & Education*, Volume 40, Issue 4, May 2003, Pages 377-391.

### APPENDIX A

Grade	Assessment Criteria

0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ No postings; no participation.</li> </ul>
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Poor quality individual contributions &amp; reports. Little evidence of engagement with the subject matter.</li> <li>■ Little or no responsiveness to the postings of fellow group members.</li> <li>■ No contribution to the organisation of the group's activities</li> </ul>
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Less than satisfactory individual contributions &amp; reports. Some evidence of engagement with subject matter but little evidence of analysis and application.</li> <li>■ Some responsiveness to the postings of fellow group members.</li> <li>■ Little contribution to the organisation of the group's activities.</li> </ul>
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Satisfactory individual contributions &amp; reports. Evidence of analysis and application based upon the subject materials.</li> <li>■ Basic, satisfactory responsiveness to the postings of fellow group members.</li> <li>■ Basic, satisfactory contribution to the organisation of the group's activities.</li> </ul>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Good quality individual contributions &amp; reports. Evidence of an analytical approach and the synthesis of new propositions based upon the subject materials</li> <li>■ Good, clear engagement with the postings of fellow group members.</li> <li>■ Positive contribution to the organisation and atmosphere of the group.</li> </ul>
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ High quality individual contributions &amp; reports. Synthesis and analysis evaluation.</li> <li>■ Very responsive and positive engagement with the postings of fellow group members.</li> <li>■ Very positive contribution to the self-organisation of the group and towards the establishment of an intelligent and supportive atmosphere within the group.</li> </ul>