

The Online Learner.

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Abstract

The development of the National Grid for Learning is predicated on the assumption that the benefits of online courses are such that Distance Learning will be enhanced by the use of ICT. The drive to improve the ICT skills and techniques of UK teachers, through the use of ICT, will soon be implemented.

This paper examines some assumptions inherent in the model.

The experience of the online learner is analysed from an ethnomethodological perspective.

Introduction

Much of the literature for online courses has focused on the range of strategies that can be employed when constructing a course, and when teaching online. Paulsen (1995) describes the range of pedagogical techniques that can be used; Berge (1996) examines the role of the instructor on such courses, whilst O'Connor (1998) examines ways in which styles of learning can be adopted within an online environment. The underlying approaches tend to be Constructivist, with a tilt towards Collaborative learning.

Garfoot (1998) examines the experiences of the Australian Open Training & Education Network and describes the online teaching and learning environment in transactional terms. Other studies focus on student outcomes: Ellis & Shurville (1999) examine the use of an online environment to develop student writing skills. Monteith & Smith (1999) look at the student experience of working in a virtual campus. Gale (1999) analyses the factors involved in the completion of online courses.

What is missing is the perspective of the online learner, and an examination of the ways in which online learning is qualitatively different from either distance, or face-to-face, learning.

A Personal View.

From March 25 to August 5 1998 I participated in the online course 'Learning to Teach On-Line', organised by Sheffield City College and Barnsley College. The programme was targeted at teachers and others who may support online learning courses. Its aim was to raise awareness of the skills required and the issues which may arise when supporting or designing such programmes. It was designed as an online distance learning programme to provide participants with first-hand experience of this type of learning. Online collaborative work was built into the scheme.

Building a schedule.

One great advantage of a 'traditional' face to face course is that a student can write the course timetable into a diary and regard it as one of life's fixed points. Life is re-arranged to accommodate the course. Coursework deadlines might slip, but the embarrassment of running well-worn excuses past a cynical tutor means that the slippage is comparatively minimal. On the other hand, dead winter evenings, bad weather, illness and a thousand and one excuses are responsible for a dropout rate that many institutions factor into the staff-student ratio at enrolment.

If one's learning group is congenial, then that provides an additional incentive to make an effort. But it is an effort. I spent two years hacking down the M1 from Leeds to Sheffield twice a week for an MA course. Sometimes the amount of will-power I had to expend left me brain-dead for the ensuing session. And then I had to drive home ...

Distance learning varies. There's the attraction of completing the course in one's own time, but my experience is that the amount of will-power needed to fit in the work to a family schedule is often greater than that needed to get to a meeting. Face-to-face learning is an activity that displaces something else: if I am in Sheffield, I can't be anywhere else. But with distance learning, especially CMC distance learning, we don't displace: we add yet

another activity; we multitask, shave our day and night into even thinner salami slices and run the risk of doing everything a little less efficiently.

But online learning did mean that, when I had a free weekend, I could move a lot of work out of the way. I could squeeze in an hour's work before I left for work and, perhaps the biggest bonus of all, I had an infinite information source available for a reasonable rate even at peak telephone charge times. In contrast, it cost me three hours and a few pounds' worth of petrol to attend a meeting at Huddersfield University.

The ghost in the machine?

As many teachers will confirm, the 'computer as scapegoat' syndrome is difficult to refute. With CMC this lurks as an ever-present threat, both to the learner and the teacher. My own machine fell over a few times during the three months of the course. I lost my email archive and had to reinstall most things. At work the computer network fell over once a week, and so on. All of this was absolutely true - and difficult for the tutor to verify.

The judgement must be, however, that the advantages of CMC far outweigh the disadvantages - and we're only at the start of things in this country. In the next three years, we're told, things will become easier: Data access through satellite, ISDN or cable modems at home, the use of good graphics, video clips and sound: all will transform the nature of online education.

Collaborative learning.

Working with other members of an online learning group was interesting. The first person to reply to a posting or a question from the tutor very often said what I wanted to say. By the time I had thought of something original, things had moved on (by about three weeks, if my past performance was anything to go by.) Other contributors approached issues from a different angle: the conceptual shock that this applied jolted me out of routine tramlines of thought. Conversation threads could be followed up with individuals at a later point.

On the other hand, because online conversations are usually a-synchronous, you can strip out all the paralinguistic fillers and focus on content. Nobody worries about typos: if you

indulge in oral malapropism (now there's a concept for Fetishists Monthly) your listeners automatically discount whatever intelligence you might think you possess. And as I age short-term memory becomes less reliable. Part-way through a conversation I sometimes find that I have, as my students would say 'lost the plot'.

With computer-mediated conversation, no matter how heavy a night I may have had previously, the record of a conversation can be reloaded. Unless I've had to reformat Drive C once more. In which case other people can bounce the message back. Verbatim.

Conversation is re-defined.

What's needed with online teaching and learning?

Online instruction requires the skills of a good primary school teacher. The pedagogical and social requirements promote the features necessary to maintain a learning environment in a classroom where individuals move at different speeds. This is, perhaps, the shift for adults learning to teach online: that content becomes of less importance than process for the teacher - or instructor, or trainer.

Learning to teach online is essentially experiential, and those learning how to do so need to experience the potential sufferings of our students. We all have to get out there and do it for ourselves, because what we're looking for is performance competence, rather than a body of knowledge. We bring our own pedagogical background and expectations to the arena, and try to map those onto the course.

Facilitating collaborative learning is a slippery concept: how can we measure individual success? If we're looking at performative competence, then that's easy to monitor. If we're looking at knowledge, then there must be a point at which a tutor may have to determine strands which are deemed to be missing.

When a tutor assumes the role of moderator in the learning process a level of control over the conversational threads is required, so that contributors who are unaware of their effect on other members should be prompted to behave accordingly. Which could be easier than in a conventional class.

The final - and possibly most important - issue is that of time management. Tutors engaging in online work should be able to assign blocks of time to the work in the same way as they would to those conventionally timetabled. There's the rub. The very nature of online work is its ad-hoc nature. The appeal of online work to administrators is its low cost. If the two are combined, the tutor could find herself under pressure to complete the work in fragments, through the day (and night).

The Salami Factor.

This potential for the fragmentation of work is important. I've experienced at first hand the problems inherent in assuming that I can work in short slices of time at work. Short of shutting myself away and locking the door, it's very difficult. I finally had to re-schedule things so that I could work at home - which meant that much of it was done at the weekends. This must inhibit peer interaction, in that responses lack any sense of immediacy.

I soon realised that it was necessary for me to print out the sections of the course, and copies of the directories with messages and tasks in. Despite the fact that my computer is constantly in use, it was very easy to lose track of where I was up to with work. The weight of a file in my briefcase was a tangible reminder that there was work to be done.

I spent a lot of time kicking ideas around before I came up with an appropriate response. In a way it's because I had *sort-of-worked-out* responses that have worked (for me) up to now, but the course put me on the spot and made me come up with an unequivocal response. And yet ...

Netiquette and online ethics.

One activity in the course produced a Netiquette dilemma. The instructions said:

"... details of the tasks he suggests ..." and then provided a link.

So I clicked.

And then found the instruction to mail \$20 if the '*contents is of use to you.*' And they were - and should have been, since the college provided the link. So who mails \$20? The college? Was it part of our course fees?

If we're talking about netiquette then I think that the vexed questions of discourse patterns, tone of use, flaming and emoticons, which are of current concern, are essentially transitory and not really relevant. In a lot of cases they're an online manifestation of restricted communication patterns that you get in any male-dominated society. You ignore them - or prod the sender into a more appropriate frame.

(There's a good discussion of the issues in 'Manners Matter' at http://www.wired.com/collections/virtual_communities/5.11_miss_manners1.htm)

The real issue for people teaching and learning online is one of ethics.

- How do you respond when you're asked to pay for the use of text on which someone has worked quite hard?
- What do you do when you encounter students' work that has obviously been taken from a range of sources but not attributed?
- Do we really want text to be completely original, when what we're asking is whether or not someone has learned something?

Maybe, in another few years, these are the issues that will be the substance of netiquette - or academic ethics.

Learning Gains.

The course provided me with the opportunity to carry out a number of very useful tasks. It pushed me to evaluate search engines I might not otherwise have used. There's a temptation to stick with two or three search engines and assume that they're the 'best' for the subjects one habitually researches. I was quite surprised at the range of information that either did, or didn't, come up when I ran searches as part of the course activities. It

was at that point that I downloaded a very useful utility called WebFerret, which pulled in sources I might never have found.

Another task involved posting messages in a variety of formats. Ingrained work habits and assumptions were swiftly undermined. After using web-based email on a number of machines I reverted to simple email, rather than that with attachments, providing the document was straightforward. Many institutional networks won't allow attachments to be downloaded. It's a point I'd not considered when I advised my students to use web email.

The requirement to work in a number of formats was invaluable. Not everyone uses Win95 and Office - and the download time of some files gives cause for thought. It doesn't matter if you download the files at work and you don't have to pay telecoms bills, but the thought of a personal phone bill arriving at the same time as the overdraft statement does tend to concentrate the mind wonderfully and make one aware of more cost-effective ways to send files.

Working with web-based utilities was more problematic than I initially anticipated. And web-based utilities are the way we really need to go, if a wider population is to use online resources in libraries, community centres and all the other access points opening up. It's worth pooling the experiences of all the institutions that are using these at the moment to share best practice.

Implications for the National Grid for Learning.

One aspect of the course that proved interesting was that it forced me to assess whether it was possible to do a course like this at work. It wasn't for me. I started the course at work, then moved through work/home, then home/work before completing it at home. Unless people who use the National Grid for Learning have dedicated time at work to learn, then the net result will be that people use NGfL at home - in their own time, and at their own expense. This may well have a significant impact on take-up.

Ways of Learning.

Some of the activities provided on the course proved less effective for me than others. Group work raised its ugly head a number of times, then was quickly lowered. It may simply be that learning to teach online is not conducive to group work - or, that the personality types who are drawn to a course of this type are not group workers. The same problem was observed with open conferences. The advantage of an open conference is that the tutor can assume an active role - steering discussion into areas that might prove fruitful; clarifying misconceptions; posing new questions and arbitrating when disagreements arise. The main disadvantage is that the tutor will assume that no postings to the conference = no contributions = no learning. Students will then feel a compulsion to contribute.

The issue is essentially one of learning styles. Some personality types resist group learning, preferring to work autonomously. Despite this, one of the assumptions of much of the literature is that collaborative learning is a very powerful tool facilitated by the medium. This could well be another case of the clash between teacher assumptions and student needs.

Personal experience with clunky web-based conferencing systems suggests that email lists offer a faster way to communicate. I certainly used the group mailing list rather than the conferencing system. Whenever I looked things up in the conference area there was very little that was new, so the compulsion to sign in became less and less every time.

Online courses offer intriguing possibilities: on the one hand, completion of an online course offers a practical demonstration of competence. If a person completes a course, then they're demonstrating that they have the skills to do so. The tricky part is combining that with course content. Understanding and learning can be assessed in an applied situation - through specific questions - but confirming the authenticity of the learner's response is awkward.

Validating learning with online systems.

In any course involving certification the authenticity of student work is crucial. On the one hand, can we be sure that the student who registered for an online course is the one who undertook the work? And if we can guarantee that, can we be sure that the answer hasn't been downloaded from another website? On the other hand, who needs the summative assessment? Is it to be used for careers and salary purposes? Is it to be used as a gold standard of competence (as, we are told, are A-levels - until, that is, the results are announced. Then standards have fallen.)

One of the issues that has not been made explicit in the rhetoric of lifelong learning is why people should sign up for it. If it's because they have to, then you'll always have the problem of verification. If it's because they want to, then there's no real problem.

Schools online?

Online learning offers schools access to a wider community than that contained within their four walls or their neighbourhood. With an appropriate infrastructure and a committed staff a school could enhance every aspect of the learning experience to which its students are entitled.

Post-16 work in minority subjects can develop specialisms which transcend the limitations of timetables and staffing. Video-conferencing offers one way forward.

The development of school intranets offers the most cost-effective way for schools to start the process of online learning. Revision courses, minority subjects and additional modules can all be placed on a school intranet. Links can take students to web-based information sources.

The experiences which the NGfL is likely to offer may well provide the impetus for the development of courses in school which will prepare our students for Life-long Learning.

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