

CO-CREATING A PROGRAMME: THE MSC IN E-LEARNING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Hamish Macleod, Jen Ross and Siân Bayne, School of Education, University of Edinburgh

This paper considers the interaction of students and tutors as the basis of the emergent, or co-created, nature and outcomes of the Masters Programme in E-Learning in the University of Edinburgh's School of Education¹.

The Programme was launched in September of 2006, although a number of pilot instances of the foundational course (*Introduction to digital environments for learning*) had been run before this. The Programme is taken entirely at a distance, with almost all of the communications between students, tutors and the administrative structures taking place online. Completion of the full Masters requires students to take six courses selected from an array of ten presently available (with others under development) and to undertake a research dissertation. There are also exit routes to a Postgraduate Certificate (on completion of three courses) and a Postgraduate Diploma (six courses). Although it is possible to complete the Programme in one year of full-time study, the vast majority of students are participating part-time. At time of writing, there are about 120 students enrolled on the Programme, and the first four research dissertations have been received.

The Student Group

We consider the principal strength of the Programme to be the quality and variety of the students who participate. The Programme has been able to recruit both junior and senior colleagues, from roles variously administrative, academic and technical within their institutions and organisations. Participants come not only from higher and further education, but also from government and corporate training and development settings, and from commercial and non-profit organisations that provide educational and technical services to customers. Most work in large or medium-sized organisational settings with the possibility of a rich technical infrastructure behind them, but some are independent consultants or trainers who have to carry the burden for their own technical support. The group is self selected to have a certain minimum level of technical fluency, as the ability to communicate online using a browser and email, and to create written work using a word processing tool are assumed. It is still possible however, and will continue to be possible for reasons of equity, to apply for a place at the University of Edinburgh using a paper application form. Despite their general technical competence, albeit across a wide range of experience and expertise, some are openly anxious about their relationship with technology, and its impact upon them, their professional relationships and identity.

This variety presents first of all a very profound problem for the design of the courses making up the Programme, but also a very real strength. Because of the vast array of experience and knowledge represented in the group, the role of the designer of a course, and also that of the tutor who brings

¹ <http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/e-learning/>

that design to life (often and ideally the same person in our distributed and interdisciplinary team), is most usefully seen as that of an orchestrator of experience and interaction (Caine & Caine, 1994, p. 5). While all of the courses encourage a period of introductory social communication in the interest of promoting group cohesion, and of putting people at their ease within the group such that they will feel able to engage with the activities which follow, the very act of setting forth one's background experiences, professional needs, and personal aspirations establishes a rich intellectual marketplace (the notion of "bazaar" might convey it better) in which the curriculum of the Programme can constantly be examined, elaborated and redefined.

The Programme Team; Tutors and Designers

Like the Programme students, those contributing to the teaching team bring a varied array of backgrounds, both in terms of academic domain and in experience of the application of technologies in support of both campus-based and online learners. Of particular note is the involvement of colleagues from the University's educational development unit, and information services, reflecting the conviction of the need (whether online or off-) for collaboration across professional role boundaries in the support of adult learners.

The general role of the tutor is that of participant and facilitator, learning along with the students. Different courses model different approaches to the design of the online learning experience, as individual designers and tutors come to develop their own online voices (Spector, 2007) and cultivate a presence within the virtual space of the course (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). The Programme has provided us with fascinating opportunities to explore just what it is that the online tutor has to do (Macleod and Ross, 2007).

The Domain of Concern; Online Learning

Teaching a programme about the technological support of learning is a particularly rewarding experience. The topic is rapidly evolving and changing, and is inherently interdisciplinary and collaborative. Because the students are participating in their studies through the medium under study, they can be expected to be more than averagely engaged in the work, and exploratory in their orientation towards it. Further they are more tolerant than many other groups might be when it comes to the vagaries and unreliability of the communication media, as a big part of their agenda is to learn about teaching with technology by experiencing for themselves first hand just what it feels like to be a learner dependent on technology. Lessons can be learned from unsuccessful approaches and, while we strive to set forth a well planned and organised programme of experiences, the openness of our students to experimentation does tend to dull the worst excesses of conservatism. The fact too that all of the courses making up the Programme were conceived and born in their online instances, rather than being translated from existing campus-based offerings, has meant that there have been few assumptions to be challenged, or traditions to be overturned.

The Curricular Content

The teaching team and the participating students share in the evolution of the curriculum of the Programme, the students for the most part bringing their professional and intellectual needs, and the teachers being, at least potentially, the sources of new ideas of how to act in and think about the world. These roles

are, of course, frequently reversed, and represent more a matter of the location of responsibility than of the outworking of things on any given day. It is the responsibility of the students to bring practical and intellectual curiosity, and it is the responsibility of the teachers to ensure that learning takes place. But the expectation is that students will contribute resources for one another's learning as will the teacher. These resources will come in the form of discussion, and the formulation of searching questions, in the telling of stories about experience, or in reference to valued reading materials. The interactive nature of such exchanges makes it highly likely that the arrival of a particular insight offered by one, will fall into a "teachable moment" (Stewart, 1993) being experienced by another.

The course "content" provides a structure into which such collaborative exchanges can exist. A dedicated "consumer" would derive some benefit by merely following the preordained pathway established by the course designer's vision, but a course can only come alive through a participation which involves contribution as well as consumption. In some areas of enquiry, progress will be driven by the exploration of a landscape for which the teacher believes that he or she holds a map, but this will usually be found to be more a matter of degree than kind. Considering the evidences available about the nature of learning may require more directed guidance in matters of academic tradition (things that a student would be expected to know) than, for example, exploring the contribution of games and play to learning.

The design of the course, and particularly the tasks to be undertaken, determines the angle of insertion of the learner into the intellectual space, but the trajectory through that space may very well differ quite significantly from one student to another, or between instances of a given course. This is principally what we mean and understand by 'co-creation' of knowledge, and in the section that follows we will discuss the ways in which our technologies and teaching practices support such co-creation.

That said, it seems to be the case that there is often a pattern of convergent evolution; that important issues will out, and that one thing does have a habit of following another. Students from one cohort would most likely recognise the journey that another cohort was taking. In addition, however unconventional we may feel our Programme to be, we are located within a conventional higher education institution, where students are assessed by tutors. We have tried to mitigate this in part by inviting students on some courses to nominate additional assessment criteria for their assignments, which can take the form of a traditional or web-based essay, a wiki or blog, or any format that students can imagine and persuade their tutor to assess. In past years assignments have been presented as a Second Life² "sky box", a Socratic dialogue, and a multimedia web essay, to name but a few.

However, to speak lightly of learning tasks does mask the important fact that some of these tasks are assessed, and that assessment contributes to the final grade awarded to the student. The tension between the flexibility that we encourage students to feel they have in taking their own path, and the assessments which constitute unavoidable markers along that path, has on one

² <http://secondlife.com/>

memorable occasion resulted in a difficult but interesting event between student and tutor on a course exploring game-based learning, where the student undertook within an assessed blog space to induct his tutor without warning into an alternate reality game of his own devising (see Macleod and Knock, 2007). The tutor's difficulty in deciding how to mark this innovative piece of work which nonetheless definitely did not meet the assessment criteria for the assignment brought home for us the limits of our, and our students', freedom in relation to assessment. Though this was a unique event in our experience of the Programme so far, it does highlight some of the challenges we experience when we try to make co-creation a basic principle of our pedagogy.

This is an area we are, as a Programme team, interested in continuing to explore, because even as our teaching and learning evolves rapidly in online spaces, assessment is less amenable to change. We sometimes feel we are pushing at the edges of a space that remains, at its centre, fundamentally the same in its relations of power between tutor and student, and its construction of learning as prescriptive and heavily focussed on the individual. This is not easily resolved, even by the extensive use we make of collaborate tools and environments. We are fortunate in our subject area, however, to have time and excuse to have these conversations with students, and to encourage them to consider, for themselves and their own students, where the boundaries of co-creation might lie.

The Technologies in Use

The kernel of the technological support for the Programme is a conventional virtual learning environment (VLE). For our purposes this is WebCT, which is the institutional platform used at the University of Edinburgh. The VLE is used as the first point of contact for the students with a given course, including their access to any prescribed reading, and the orientational information provided by the tutors. It is also the route by which we engage with them in the submission of their assignment work, and in the return of feedback and grades. It is also used, in many courses, as a place where asynchronous text discussion takes place.

We see the VLE as a jumping off place as well as a destination however, beyond which we encourage students to explore the educational relevance of a wide range of Web tools, and especially those that we see as contributing to the ethos of the Programme. As students progress through the Programme, they have the opportunity to work extensively with wikis, social networking, virtual worlds, social bookmarking, mapping, and many new and emerging technologies.

A primary example is the case of the weblog, or blog³. The foundation course is structured around an assessed reflective blog, which is worth 50% of the final mark for the course. The blog encourages students to experiment with ideas and voice as they engage in a semester-long conversation with their tutor. Tutors comment regularly on blog posts throughout the semester, and then give the student a mark at the end based on the blog's success in meeting the assessment criteria (drawn from the postgraduate common marking scheme). As students' experience of using their blog increases, and they become more

³ For our weblog we use a locally installed instance of the educationally oriented social networking system ELLG.

confident with the medium, we expect and encourage them to open their writing to a wider audience of trusted colleagues. Importantly, the growing of the blog, and the widening of the circle of readers, can be under the control of the blog's author right up to the point at which the blog is opened to the world at large. Even then, control of publication is such that some materials can remain private, and others retained for access by only a select group.

Some uses of technology are in support of social cohesion within the group. We use the social networking site Facebook among ourselves as a Programme team, and invite out students to join us. While there is no compulsion to participate, we feel that our students need to be aware of the social networking phenomenon, and the place that such resources may play in the lives and social practices of their own students and colleagues. Increasingly however, we find that Programme participants have already established a presence in Facebook before they join us. We also introduce and encourage the use of instant messaging systems such as Microsoft Messenger or Skype. In some courses and at some times we use, or see used, these tools for the express purpose of engaging in a synchronous tutorial conversation, but more often the manifestation of presence provided by such tools supports light-touch sociability and conviviality, and opportunities for convocation and consultation. This is the distance programme's substitute for bumping into one another in the corridor.

The technology of discourse and debate has classically been the asynchronous, threaded discussion forum. Through this medium students are encouraged to compare notes on their readings, to explore their understanding of what they have read, and to seek guidance from tutors and peers. A group blog has also been used for this purpose.

A wiki provides an ideal medium for students distanced from one another to engage in collaborative writing and the co-creation of understanding around a topic. When a course-initiated project calls for this interaction we facilitate the use of a particular wiki tool that we have identified (PBWiki⁴). But we see that students are increasingly selecting and using their own preferred tools in support of *ad hoc* collaborations and communications, elaborating their own digital *modi operandi*. The rhetoric of "smart mobs" seems particularly apposite here (Rheingold, 2003). A number of students have displayed their creativity by, in response to a course assignment, demonstrating how the functionality of a conventional virtual learning environment can be recreated for the support of a small group of learners by the judicious lacing together of freely available web-based element. This creativity has been particularly manifest in the context of our course on digital game-based learning, where students have constructed elaborate and engaging exploratory learning experiences for their colleagues based on existing web sites and services.

The wisdom of even relatively small crowds (Surowiecki, 2004) can be harnessed for research purposes through the use social sharing, tagging and recommendation tools like del.icio.us and Diigo. The simple expedient of using a unique, course-specific tag allows students to leave trails of their web researches for colleagues to follow. Once the advantage of collaboration in this way has

⁴ <http://pbwiki.com/>

been established, the students are encouraged to participate in the wider "flocking" behaviour that such collaborative tools make possible.

Student response to the Programme

The Programme seems to be well received by the participating students. All members of all of the courses are invited, at the end of the course, to complete a web-based evaluation exercise, rating their experience of the course on dimensions such as overall quality, value of participation, interest, intellectual and practical demands, and appropriateness of workload. For the most part, responses are highly positive, and comments received enable the Programme team to address any areas of concern. Where problems exist, there are rarely any surprises, as what the students raise as a concern has usually already been a manifest concern registered by the teachers. And while the end-of-course evaluation exercise provides a source of final and summary feedback, the nature of the ongoing online engagement between students and tutors means that structural problems can be raised as and when they arise, and addressed immediately.

A further innovation on the MSc, made possible by technology, is the inclusion of all students on the Programme in the staff/student liaison committee that ordinarily would be attended by one or two student representatives from each year. Students are able to contribute anonymously or under their own names, as they choose.

While the retention of students is a concern for any programme of study, student withdrawal has always been found to be a particular problem for courses involving distance participation (Simpson, 2003). By this metric too, our Programme appears successful. While it is always difficult to untangle the multiple reasons that exist for a student's decision to discontinue participation on a programme of study, including health and personal circumstances, our retention rate must be estimated as being upwards of 95%.

Conclusion

We have learned a great deal from our students, about the nature of learning and teaching in theory and in practice, about the conduct and possibilities of an online programme of study, and about the various organisational, pedagogic, technical and social dimensions of supporting the online learner. The challenge will be to build on these foundations without loss to the openness and flexibility of what we hope to be an innovative programme, and a stimulating and creative working environment for students and tutors – co-researchers – alike. Evidences are that we can achieve this successfully and legally within the structures and assessment regulations of even an ancient institution.

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