Developing Online Facilitation skills in Faculty using an Immersion Model of Training

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A dissertation submitted to the University of Dublin,
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Science in I.T. in Education.

2006

Declaration

I declare that the work described in this dissertation is, except where otherwise stated, entirely my own work and has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a large growth in the number of third level colleges offering Online and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes. While many programmes report success, there are also reports of failure and evidence of high dropout rates(Frankola, 2001; O'Connor, Sceiford, Wang, Foucar-Szocki, & Griffin, 2003). An examination of studies undertaken into both successful and unsuccessful programmes highlight good tutor facilitation and high levels of interactivity as key to programme success(Gibson, Tesone, & Blackwell, 2003; Irani, 2001; Noakes, 2001).

Yet, although the online facilitator is seen as key to the success of ODL programs, studies report a wide variety in approaches to faculty training in online facilitation skills (Gibson et al., 2003). This paper examines the new skills required of the online facilitator and explores how best they might be acquired.

It proposes an immersion model of training where faculty become online students themselves to learn the pedagogy and techniques of online facilitation (Gibson et al., 2003). The immersion model can be described as a model where the medium (an online facilitated course) equals the message (lessons on online facilitation), and thereby reinforces the message or content. The course on online facilitation incorporates an array of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools and is delivered via the Moodle Course Management System.

A case study is undertaken in a third level college that has not to date delivered ODL. Ten faculty members with little or no experience of ODL, participate in an online course and some go on to deliver and facilitate their own online lesson. A series of qualitative data collection instruments are used to collect information on participant experiences.

An analysis of the data collected concluded that the immersion model of training provided faculty with a rich multi-modal learning experience which provided participants with knowledge and understanding of the role of the online facilitator, and also yielded additional benefits.

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Abbreviations

CMC   Computer Mediated Communication
CMS   Course Management System
IM   Immersion Model
ODL   Online and Distant Learning
OF   Online Facilitation
OL   Online Learning
VoIP   Voice over IP

1. Introduction

An examination of recent case studies undertaken into both successful and unsuccessful Online and Distance Learning (ODL) programmes highlight good tutor facilitation and high levels of interactivity as being key to programme success (Gibson et al., 2003; Irani, 2001; Noakes, 2001).

To deliver ODL programmes, faculty require additional skills to those used in traditional face to face learning. The creation and sustainment of online communities, the appropriate use of various forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) tools and the effective e-moderation of Electronic Discussion Board's (EBDs) are identified as unique skills of the ODL environment. (Mason & Romiszowski, 1996; Paulsen, 1995; Salmon, 2003). Very often suitable training in these skills does not occur (Gibson et al., 2003).

This paper proposes an immersion model of training whereby faculty (from hereon referred to as participants) become online students themselves to learn the pedagogy and techniques of online facilitation (Gibson et al., 2003; Woodward, 2003). The immersion model can be described as a model where the medium equals the message or process equals content, and thereby reinforces the content.

The implementation of this model is by way of an online course where the medium (an online facilitated course) equals the message (lessons on online facilitation). In addition to learning the pedagogy and skills of online facilitation, the course provides participants with real experience of online learning technologies and provides access to a facilitator role model. When they have completed the course, some participants go on to deliver and facilitate their own online lesson, thereby extending the learning experience in line with experiential learning principles (Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

The online course is delivered using the Moodle Course Management System(CMS) and the Skype Voice over IP (VoIP) product is also used to provide additional CMC tools. This is done to promote a high level of student interaction and to provide participants with the experience of a wide range of CMC tools. A flash tutorial on the use of Moodle precedes the course to provide scaffolding on use of the new technology.

A case study is undertaken with ten participants who have little experience of ODL. A series of data collection instruments including pre and post-course questionnaires, discussion board postings, facilitator journals and a post course interview are used to collect qualitative information on participant experiences.

Structured analysis techniques are used to analyse the data. An evaluation of the data collected indicates several benefits that accrue from the immersion programme and the conclusion is that the use of the immersion model provided participants with a rich multi-modal learning experience which they believe enhanced their knowledge and understanding of the role of the online facilitator. In addition other benefits accrued as a result of taking the course online.

Structure of the paper:

Chapter 2 seeks to examine the literature on the role of the online facilitator and the skills required to perform this role. It examines how these skills are currently being taught and explores how they might best be acquired. It looks at the immersion model of learning and proposes its use as an effective model to impart these skills.

Chapter 3 describes the design of a technology based learning experience where a course on online facilitation skills is delivered via an online learning course.

Chapter 4 reports on the Methodology and Implementation of a case study, defending the choice of research methodology employed and describing the implementation of the study.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study and discusses their meaning in relation to the research question. The concluding chapter summarises what has been learned in the study.

2. A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Recent years have seen an explosion in the number of third level colleges offering ODL programmes. Earlier models were quite passive in nature, but advances in technology have provided colleges with the opportunity to improve the online learning process, through increased communication, interactivity among participants, and incorporation of collaborative pedagogical models (Schrum & Hong, 2002b).

However, technology simply provides the infrastructure; to be successful ODL programs need to be based on sound pedagogical principles and be facilitated by a qualified online facilitator. A 2001 study (Gibson, Tesone, Hodgetts, & Blackwell, 2001) which examined online student's experiences reported

> "The authors conclude that the online instructor is the single most important person in making the student's experience a positive or a negative one and suggest that careful training and monitoring of faculty is a necessary early step in taking programs to cyberspace" (p. 367)

Another report investigating the causes of low completion rates in online courses, cites inexperienced or even incompetent instructors as being a key reason for non completion of courses (Frankola, 2001).

This chapter will examine the preparation of faculty for the online facilitation role. It will investigate what new skills are required and explore solutions for the provision of these skills. In particular the immersion model of training, which embodies elements of constructivist and experiential learning theories, is recommended and defended. This model is used to describe a learning environment where participants are immersed in the medium that they are learning about .

The focus of this study is specific to the facilitation, rather than preparation, of online courses and so does not include the area of Instructional Design. Equally, other reported causes for non-completion of ODL programmes such as problems with the technology, poor course design and lack of support while all valid and requiring attention, are outside the scope of this paper.

Online and Distance Learning (ODL)

This paper uses Desmond Keegan's definition of ODL (Keegan, 1988). Here, ODL is characterised by

- the separation of teachers and learners which distinguishes it from face-to-face education
- the influence of an educational organisation which distinguishes it from self-study and private tutoring
- the use of a computer network to present or distribute some educational content
- the provision of two-way communication via a computer network so that students may benefit from communication with each other, teachers and staff

This paper will focus on the delivery of ODL from third level education institutions and is specific to education delivered online using the World Wide Web. Additionally, while online education is sometimes used to supplement face-to-face learning in a blended learning model, the focus of this study is particular to its use to facilitate distance learning where the need to establish online communities is greatest.

The following list summarises those characteristics of an online learning environment which make it different to traditional learning environments (Anderson & Elloumni, 2004; Gibson et al., 2003; Twigg, 2003)

- "Anytime anywhere" nature of the learning environment

- communication generally asynchronous – hence response is delayed

- generally the written word is the medium through which people communicate

- its reliance on keyboard and technology skills

- inability to rely of facial expressions/ body language

- shift in emphasis of tutor role from one of instructor to facilitator

Models of ODL

A growing body of literature has begun to emerge about the nature of learning online (Anderson & Elloumni, 2004; Gibson et al., 2003; Schrum & Hong, 2002a). There are several models of ODL but generally they fall into one of two categories: i) the community of learning model, typified by its collaborative interactive nature and ii) the independent study model which tends to be used by an individual in a self-study capacity without peer interaction (Anderson & Elloumni, 2004). This paper will focus on the community of learning model where peer interactivity is a major part of the learning process.

Pedagogy of ODL

Like their traditional predecessors, to be successful ODL programmes need to be based on sound pedagogical principles. Whereas earlier online learning courses were criticised as being mere information delivery systems, more recent approaches to online learning focus on dialogue, interaction and collaborative activities (Schrum & Hong, 2002a).

These courses are based on the social constructivist pedagogical model of learning, whereby learners construct their knowledge through discussion, thereby enhancing their critical thinking skills. The social constructivist model was developed by post-revolutionary Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and is a variety of cognitive constructivism that emphasises the collaborative nature of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). These models are based on the concept that peer collaboration performs a major role in learning, hence much of the literature discusses the move toward student based learning, and describes the online instructor as a facilitator. Not all commentators agree on the balance of instructor vs. student centred learning in the online arena. Many authors argue that the role of the online facilitator is that of "guide on the side" allowing students to construct their own meaning and understanding. Mason & Romiszowski (1996) state "The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator not content provider" (p. 447). As opposed to this Garrison (1988)argues

> "the self-directed assumption of andragogy suggests a high degree of independence that is often inappropriate from a support perspective and which also ignores issues of what is worthwhile or what qualifies as an educational experience" (p. 124)

Anderson & Elloumni (2004) discuss this conflict and argue for greater content input by facilitators, stating that

> "the cognitive apprenticeship model espoused by Collins, Brown, and Newman(1989), Rogoff's (1990) model of apprenticeship in thinking, and Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding analogies illustrate a helping role for teachers in providing instructional support to students from their position of greater content knowledge (Anderson & Elloumni, 2004).

This author believes that the optimum balance of instructor vs. student centred learning depends on course content and learner profiles. That is, while a student centred approach may be relevant to a group of adult learners who have some prior knowledge of a topic, it would be inappropriate in a group new to a topic who would need additional scaffolding.

Irrespective of the balance required, what is obvious is that the basis of this model of learning is dependent on an active online community of learners who participate and interact. The

Online Facilitator has the task of nurturing this community and facilitating the learning process.

The Role of the Online Facilitator

The role of the online facilitator is well documented in the literature (Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Mason, 1991; Noakes, 2001; Paulsen, 1995). Most authors categorise the responsibilities of the online facilitator under three to four main headings :- Organisational, Social, Pedagogical and Intellectual (Berge, 1995; Mason, 1991; Paulsen, 1995).

The first of these roles labelled organisational (Mason, 1991; Paulsen, 1995) managerial (Berge, 1995) or administrative (Berge & Collins, 1995) includes the tasks of setting course structure, setting goals, organising timetables, setting procedural rules, orientating participants, balancing load, inviting visiting experts, technological issues. Many of these tasks are similar to those performed for traditional course management albeit that they are performed in a technological setting.

The tasks performed under the social role are concerned with building online learning communities. The literature tends to combine the pedagogical role and Intellectual roles. This is the area where many of the new skills of online facilitation are required. While the intellectual role of content expert is not new, the manner in which information is communicated is very different. As most communication will take place using CMC tools the Online Facilitator needs to be equipped with information about the strengths and weaknesses of the various CMC tools, and strategies for their appropriate use. Finally, as most group communication takes place on electronic discussion boards, the facilitator needs to encourage active and appropriate conversation and will perform the role of electronic discussion board moderator or e-moderator .

Building Online Communities

Healthy online learning communities are defined as having the following characteristics: (Collison et al., 2000).

– Participants post regularly.
– The online community meets its members needs and participants express honest opinions.
– Participant-to-participant collaboration and teaching are evident, and spontaneous moderating occurs between participants.
– Reasonable venting about technology, content and even the facilitator is acceptable and evident
– Participants show concern and support for the community (p77)

The tasks documented in the literature under the social role of the online facilitator are necessary for the creation and sustainment of such communities. This role of social host is a new one for most instructors, or at least has a new dimension because of the vastly different nature of the social interaction in an online environment. Traditional classrooms tend to have readymade group dynamics, online students however may never meet and so the facilitator needs to create an online community to encourage social interaction, which will underpin communication and learning in the online environment.

The Salmon five-stage model sees the tasks of access and motivation followed by online socialisation as the first two building blocks of an online community (Salmon, 2003). Salmon sees the use of dedicated EDB's where participants can interact socially as essential for the online socialisation process.

The author has extracted and summarised the tasks to be performed under this heading as identified by the various other commentators (Berge, 1995; Collison et al., 2000; Paulsen, 1995; Salmon, 2003) in the table 2.1 below.

Issuing Welcome
Eliciting student introductions
Creating non -threatening environment.
Promoting human relationships
Developing group cohesiveness
Reinforcing good discussant behaviours
Discouraging poor discussant behaviours
Scene setting
Promoting interactivity
Encouraging collaboration
Modelling expected behaviour

Table 2.1 Online Facilitator Tasks – Building Online Communities

Strategic Use of CMC Tools

The community of learning model of ODL is based on the use of CMC tools to provide for interactivity and collaboration among participants. The online facilitator needs to become knowledgeable about the CMC tools available to support ODL (Berge & Collins, 1995; Paulsen, 1995). There are two main classifications of CMC, Synchronous and Asynchronous. Synchronous communication involves two or more people having simultaneous interaction with messages read and replied to as they are posted. Samples of synchronous communication tools include Chat systems, Audio & Video conferencing and Instant Messaging. Asynchronous communication happens anytime, in any place with

messages read and responded to after they have been posted. Samples of asynchronous communication tools include Email and Electronic Discussion Boards (EDBs).

Each form has its own set of benefits and limitations and the facilitator needs to be familiar with the tools that are available, comfortable with their use and informed on the benefits and limitations of each in order to effectively incorporate their use into ODL delivery.

Moderating EDB's

EDB's with their asynchronous nature, the absence of social and non-verbal cues and their dependency on keyboard literacy skills create a challenging environment for the online student, and this in turn presents challenges for the online facilitator who needs to moderate or e-moderate such forums. Salmon (2003) defines an e-moderator as an individual who presides over an electronic meeting or conference and developed a five stage model for effective e-moderation (fig. 2.1).
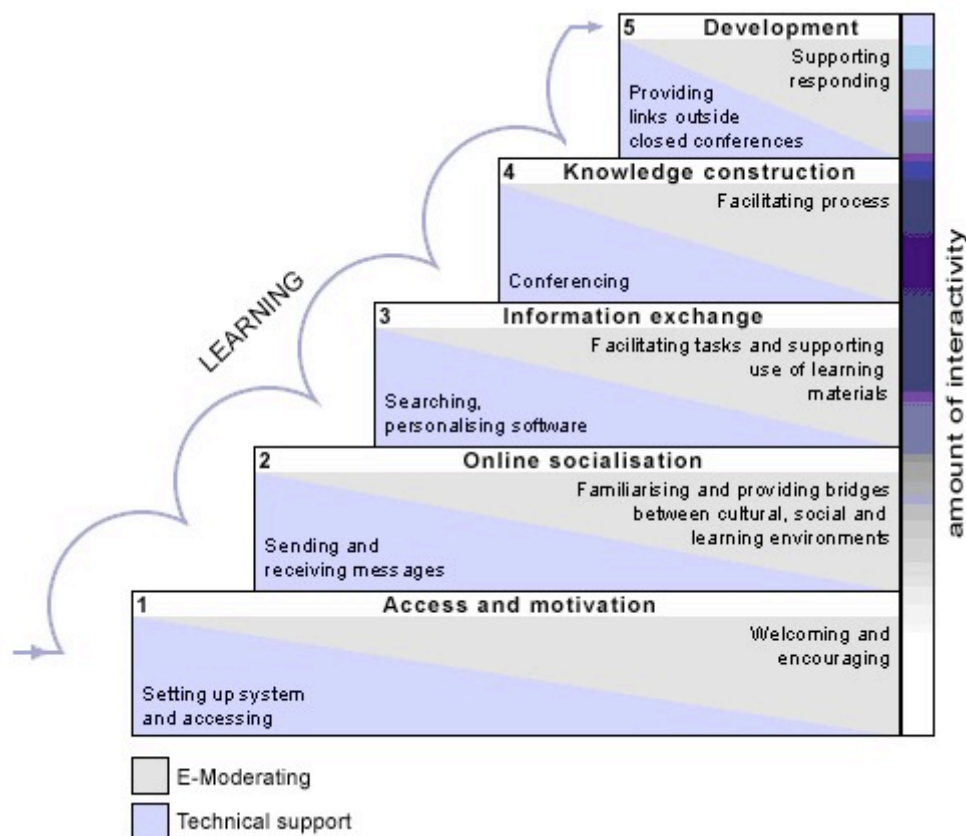
Figure 2.1 Salmon Model of E-Moderating

It is the regular and effective moderation of the EDB which moves it from the realms of a communication forum to that of a rich learning environment (Collison et al., 2000). The

tasks required to successfully moderate EDB's are taken from the literature (Berge, 1995; Paulsen, 1995) and summarised by the author in table 2.2 below

Setting the objective for discussion.
Steering the discussion forums.
Setting the tone of the discussion.
Setting expectations for contributions.
Varying participation.
Responding to student contributions and questions
Using questions and probes for studen t responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills.
Reviewing and picking up pertinent points.
Meta -Commenting.
Writing weaving comments which refer to various student contributions
Giving a decisive end to discussion.
Encouragi ng reflection.

Table 2.2 Online Facilitator Tasks – E-Moderator Role

Training Online Facilitators

Faculty training is seen as core to the success of ODL programmes (Gibson et al., 2003; Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & Williams, 2004) and while the literature is rich with details of the tasks to be performed by the facilitator, there is less written on how faculty should develop these skills.

A study conducted in 2002 discovered that most colleges that provided training in online facilitation did so using traditional teaching means (O'Reilly & Ellis, 2002). This study which reported on a series of workshops where staff became online students concluded that staff gained a great deal of benefit from taking a student perspective in their online learning and that learning by doing, learning from mistakes and from peer interaction were three ways in which participants reported learning .

The eighth annual Sloan-Consortium conference (2002) was dedicated to the topic of Faculty Development and Support for ODL. Papers presented reported a variety of approaches to faculty training (Gibson et al., 2003; Haggerty, Ronkowitz, & Reynolds, 2002; Trippe, 2002).

One case presented reported that there was an obligation on prospective faculty members to undertake a full immersion program (Gibson et al., 2003).

The Immersion Model.

The Immersion Model (IM) refers to a model of learning where the student is immersed in the environment they are learning about, hence the medium is the message, or process equals content. References to this model appear in a 2002 paper which examined a case where faculty became students themselves to learn the pedagogy and techniques of online learning (Gibson et al., 2003).

Gibson et. al.(2003) compare the effectiveness of various forms of faculty training and recommend the *immersion* model

> "In terms of process, the authors are firm believers in the immersion model ……
> faculty members who have never experienced cyberspace are handicapped when first
> teaching an online course. In fact, it may take a long time to find out what works in
> cyberspace or even to unlearn the bad habits that one develops without sufficient
> training. What better methods than casting the prospective online faculty member as a
> student? " (p. 59)

The success of the model is also borne out by the results of a study in Hong Kong University (Noakes, 2001). In that study, Noakes placed emphasis on the need for faculty to have time to learn the environment as students and to have a space to explore online technologies.

> "The most important lesson for instructors new to NL (Network Learning) is to find
> time to discover and play with NLT (Network Learning Technologies). In this way
> the instructors will experience the problems, frustrations and excitement that learners
> experience" Haughey & Anderson in Noakes (2001).

The immersion model provides prospective facilitators with this opportunity.

Other references to the same model come from the area of second language learning and Tessa Woodward has written extensively on the process which she refers to as 'Loop Input'. In her 1988 book of the same name, she defines the concept as an environment where content = process, where content is 'what' is to be learned and process is 'how' it is to be learned (Woodward, 2003).

"The content is carried by the process and the process is also part of the content. This is the loop" (p. 16).

The Immersion Model and other Learning Models

This model of learning has common characteristics with the school of constructivism where students learn by doing. It differs however in the nature of the *process*. Whereas in constructivism students may construct their understanding of the content by way of process, in the case of the immersion model the content and process are as one. The process is background and serves to reinforce the content. The student becomes immersed in a multi-sensory environment which provides a new perspective or paradigm.

There are also overlaps with the active experience cycle of Kolb's experiential learning theory where the student experiences what they have learned (Kolb & Kolb, 2006). Discussing experiential theory based learning systems, Pimentel (1999) states

> "One of the most fundamental requirements that facilitate learning is an appropriate environment where learners can have experiences. Experiential learning emphasises the roles that appropriate environments and experiences play in the learning process. In experiential learning the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied." (p. 65)

These comments apply equally well to the Immersion Model of learning which incorporates elements of both constructivism and experiential learning theories.

Using the Immersion Model for Online Facilitation Training

The consequences of applying the immersion model to online facilitation training is that the student learns at a visceral level (O'Reilly & Ellis, 2002). They have a space to learn the technology and experiment with elements of it, they learn by doing, sometimes by making mistakes. They are provided with content via a process which serves to reinforce the content (Woodward, 2003). They get to experience the effects of the theories they read about, that is, they learn about online facilitation by having an online facilitation role model (Vygotsky, 1978), they learn about online communities by being part of one (Geer & Au, 2002), they learn about online technologies by using them and they learn what it required by the online student by being an online student (Gibson et al., 2001; Noakes, 2001).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature on the role of the online facilitator and highlighted the areas of building online communities, the strategic use of CMC tools and e-Moderating EDB's as new skills that the facilitator needs to develop. It examined the immersion model of training as a suggested model to help faculty acquire these skills. The next chapter outlines the design of a technology based learning experience created to provide training in online facilitation skills and informed by the principles of the Immersion Model.

3. Design

Introduction

This chapter details the design of a learning experience delivered via an online course.
The main consideration influencing the design is that participants be immersed in the medium they are learning about. The basis of the immersion model is that content is equal to process; in this course the content relates to developing online skills and the process is online delivery and facilitation.

Design of Learning Experience

The learning experience is designed to provide content and practical experience of those areas unique to the online arena - namely, the tasks of building online communities, the strategic use of the various CMC tools and e-moderating electronic discussion boards (EDB's). The experience immerses participants in an online community and provides them with access to an array of CMC tools to allow them develop knowledge of how and in what situations the various tools work best. An online facilitator actively moderates several EDB's and facilitates the course, attempting to show by example those practices that student learns about.

The course is delivered online using Moodle, a popular Course Management System (CMS). Moodle was selected above other CMSs as it was developed to support the social constructivist pedagogical model (Dougiamas, ...Online). It incorporates features that support online communities and includes many CMC tools. Other CMC tools are incorporated into the design, and participants are encouraged to take exercises that highlight the advantages and disadvantages of the various tools in different learning situations.

An online tutorial guiding students through the Moodle system is presented at the start of the course. In addition, a printed student guide is provided for the benefit of those students whose learning styles are better served by providing detailed instructions prior to entering a new learning environment.

Building Online Communities

Online socialisation is seen as one of the first steps to be performed within a new online learning community (Salmon, 2003). The course introduction screen welcomes participants to the course and directs them to use the Moodle tutorial to familiarise themselves with the new environment (fig. 3.1). A social discussion forum/practice area immediately follows and participants are encouraged to introduce themselves online and practice with the use of the technology. These are included to facilitate the process of online socialisation.
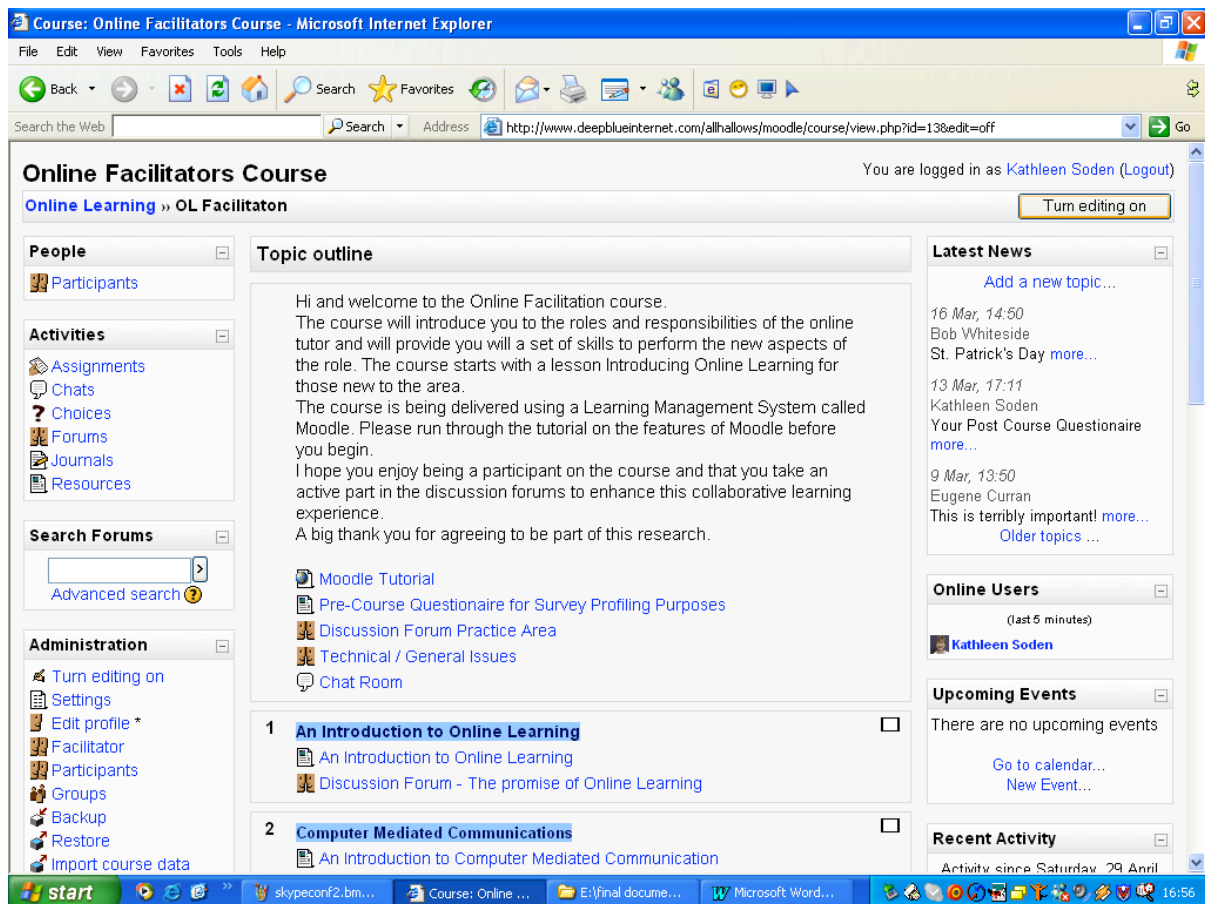
Figure 3.1 Course Introduction Screen

In order to create a greater sense of community, participant photographs are added to their profile pages and participants have a space to provide more personal details about themselves if they wish (fig. 3.2).

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Figure 3.2 Participant Profile Page

The Online Users section is placed on top/home menu and shows users currently signed on (fig. 3.3).
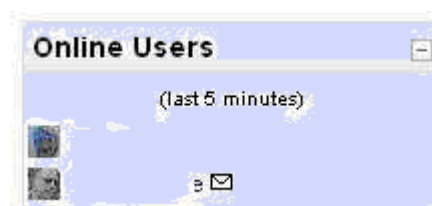
Figure 3.3 Online Users

Computer Mediated Communication Tools.

Given the relevance of interactivity to the community of learning model of distance education (Anderson & Elloumni, 2004), many tools are provided to support individual and group communication. The Moodle CMS incorporates electronic discussion forums, a chat room and a messaging facility. All of these features are incorporated into the learning

experience and their use is actively encouraged. The incorporation of the Skype VoIP product adds another rich communication tool, which enhances interactivity within the course by adding audio and video communication capabilities.

The version of Skype used supports audio communication between individuals and between groups via a conferencing facility (fig. 3.4).
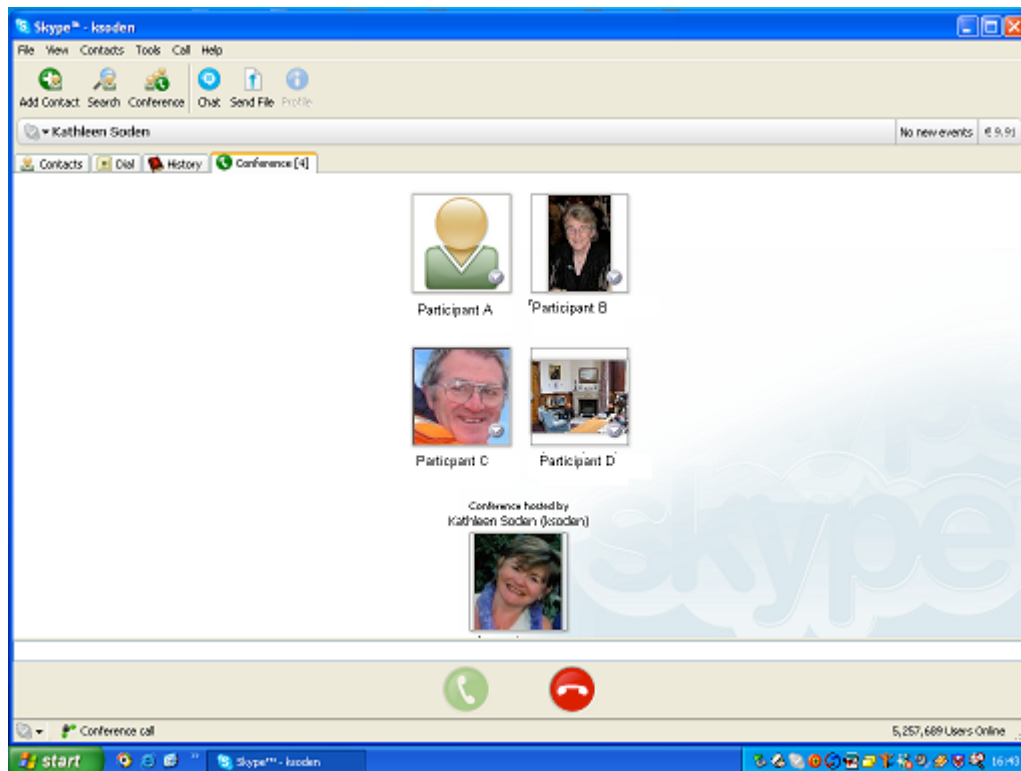
Figure 3.4 Skype Conference Call

The video conferencing mode of Skype currently supports one-to-one interactive video communications (fig 3.5). While this limits its use for group learning situations, it is included to allow participants explore the technology and to support individual communication between participants and with the facilitator. This model of communication can serve to overcome the limitations of the text based systems (Berge & Collins, 1995).

Figure 3.5 Skype Video Conferencing Call

To provide the full rich experience of the Skype environment, participants are provided with headsets incorporating both speaker and microphone and with basic web-cams to support video communications when on one to one Skype sessions.

The Moodle user profile page is updated to include a 'Skype Me' icon, and each profile is updated to include the Skype-id of the participant. This allows a Skype session to be activated from within Moodle, thereby simplifying the interface for the participants (fig. 3.6).

Figure 3.6 User Profile with Skype button.

The literature highlights the need for online facilitators to have a space to learn and explore the CMC technologies supporting ODL (Gibson et al., 2003; Noakes, 2001).

The inclusion of all of these forms of computer mediated communications provides participants with the opportunity to experiment and allows them gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the different tools when applied to various learning situations.

E-Moderating of Electronic Discussion Boards (EDB's)

In addition to the general forums for online socialisation, technical queries and news items, a separate discussion forum accompanies each lesson to allow discussion of that lesson topic (fig. 3.7).

General forums

Forum	Description	Discussions	Subscribed
Discussion Forum Practice Area	This is a place to practice using the discussion board - write whatever you like. It can be social, topical, a response to another entry or just tell a joke ...whatever you want to get you started and give you some practice.	10	Yes
News forum	General news and announcements	15	Yes
Teacher forum	A forum for teacher-only notes and discussion	0	No
Technical / General Issues	I have separated these for ease of access and will post answers to frequently asked questions here.	4	Yes

Learning forums

	Forum	Description	Discussions	Subscribed
1	Discussion Forum - The promise of Online Learning	This is for general comments on Online and Distance Learning. I did not add to it initally as I wanted to keep your workload low, however I have noticed some general comments entering other discussion strings and thought this may keep topics organised.	2	Yes
2	Disscussion Forum - Computer Mediated Communications	Various discussion strands relating to Computer Mediated Communications.	10	Yes
3	Discussion Forum - Online Facilitation	Various discussion strands relating to the role of the online facilitator.	10	Yes
4	Discussion Forum - Facilitate your own Lesson	In this forum, ask questions and swap ideas about setting up your own online course.	1	Yes

Figure 3.7 Electronic Discussion Forums

At the end of each lesson, participants are asked to consider what they have read and to enter the discussion forums and answer questions which have been set by the facilitator. They are also encouraged to post new contributions and respond to other peer postings. The facilitator attempts to exhibit good facilitation practices as highlighted in the literature in order to provide a facilitation role model for participants. This includes practices such as encouraging online socialisation, providing motivation, promoting interactivity, modelling expected

behaviour, responding to student contributions and questions, using questions and probes for student responses that focus discussion on critical concepts, writing weaving comments and concluding discussions.

See Appendix 1. for copies of course screens.

Course and Lesson Design

While the course does not deliver *content* on Instruction Design (ID) methodologies, the design of the course itself is based on ID principles (Alessi & Trollip, 2001). The course consists of four lessons or topics (fig. 3.8) , which provide information on various aspects of online learning. Each topic comprises of at least one text based lesson and links to carefully selected background reading references. A separate course template is provided for participants to base their own lesson on.

Topic arrangement is set in a linear fashion, with each topic building on the content of the previous one. To facilitate self-paced learning, all lessons are immediately available as opposed to releasing them in a phased manner over time.

Figure 3.8 Moodle Display of Lessons /Topics

Theoretical Underpinning of Course Design

The learning experience is designed to allow participants access to all four stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (fig. 3.9).
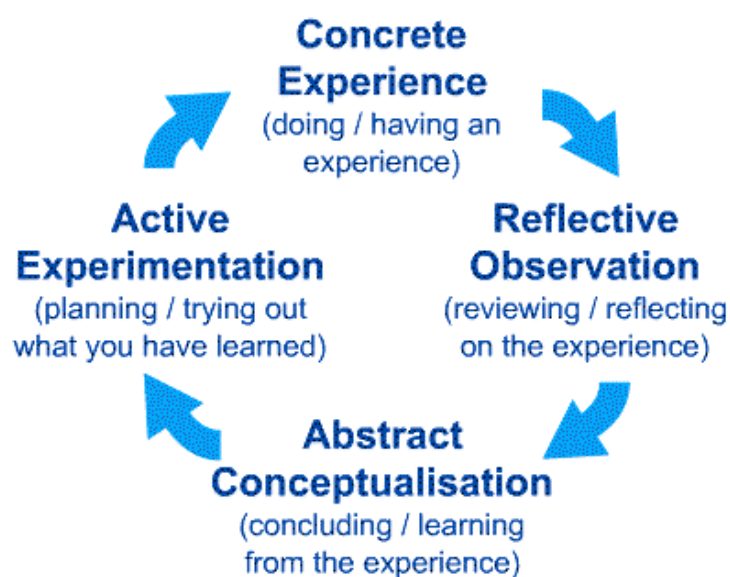
Figure 3.9 Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

Table 3.1 shows how elements within the learning experience map onto the various stages of the learning cycle thereby providing a rich learning experience for participants and catering for all learning styles.

Artefact Element	Concrete Experience	Reflective Observation	Abstract Conceptualisation	Active Experience
Student Guide	☿			
Online Moodle Tutorial	☿			☿
Course Initiation Workshop	☿?	?		
Online Course / Lessons	☿	☿		
Participation in EDB forum	☿	☿	☿	
Facilitator feedback			☿	
Student becomes facilitator				☿?

Table 3.1 Artefact elements mapped to stages of Kolb's ELT Cycle

Lesson Design

The individual lessons are designed based on Ganges unit of instruction (Gagne, 1985).

Table 3.2 shows an example of how Gagne's template of the events of a unit of instruction was applied to Topic 1 'Introduction to Online Learning'

Events	Cognitive/Learning Process	Example
1. Gaining attention (by providing a stimulus)	Reception	Use of Quotations at the start of lesson
2. Informing learners of objective	Establishment of expectancies	Stated Learning Objectives
3. Stimulating recall of prior learning	Retrieval (from long-term memory)	Definitions & reference to other known terms
4. Presenting stimulus (material)	Selective perception	Presenting content
5. Guidance of learning	Semantic encoding	
6. Eliciting performance	Response generation	Setting Q's in Forums
7. Providing feedback	Reinforcement	Facilitator response to Q
8. Assessing performance	involving additional response feedback occasions	Evaluating postings on Discussion Forums
9. Enhancing retention and transfer	Generalisation	EDB and Chat sessions on use of Online Learning

Table 3.2 Design of Instructional content based on Ganges unit of Instruction.

Technology Employed

The course is delivered on a customised version of the Moodle Course Management System (CMS) and incorporates links to the Skype VoIP product. Moodle was installed and then upgraded to a later version to take advantage of the new Skype interface. The user menu was amended to provide a button to allow users initiate a Skype session from their Moodle environment. The moodle screens were customised to reflect the branding of the college where the study would take place and menu elements were selected with care.

A third-party developed module is used to record Skype conversations. This module was developed by Yasheen Khattak of the CRITE team in TCD, and used with his kind permission.

Technology elements of the artefact developed by the author include a pre and post-course questionnaires developed in PHP/ SQL and a flash tutorial developed using a combination of the Wink open source product and Flash.

Design of the Tutorial Artefact

The tutorial is created to help the first time user of Moodle to navigate the environment. The tutorial design is informed by the literature on multimedia design (Alessi & Trollip, 2001). In their four-phase model the authors suggest that

1. Information is presented or skills are modelled.
2. The learner is guided through initial use of the information or skills
3. The learner practices for retention and fluency
4. Learning is assessed

In the case of this tutorial, the last phase is not relevant, as the purpose is simply to scaffold the learners and not for assessment.

Design

The design of the tutorial is kept simple and is presented in a linear fashion mirroring the sequence of screens that the user will encounter when using Moodle for the first time, and advising of the actions to be performed. The tutorial provides information textually on screen and by way of an audio voiceover. The tutorial also provides 'cues' for the user, noting details on the screens as they change. The option of having the tutorial interact directly with the Moodle environment was considered as a way of making it a more 'real'. This idea was rejected as it may serve to confuse the beginner who may not understand when they are in Moodle and when they are in the tutorial. Equally the designer looked at some of the open source Moodle tutorials that existed, but thought it was important that the learner would see the *exact* screens that they would encounter rather than ones based on the same platform but which looked quite different.

The first screen (fig. 3.10) introduces the tutorial and advises of expected learning outcomes:
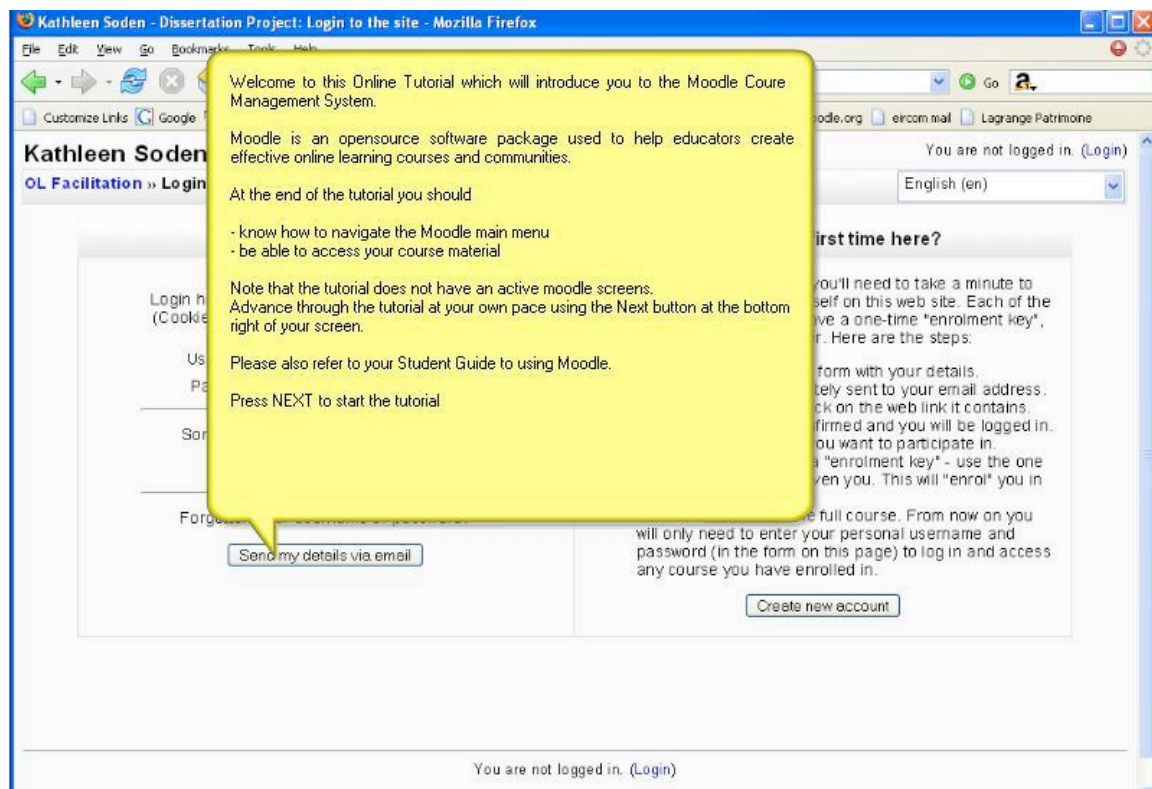
Figure 3.10 Tutorial Introduction Screen

The next and subsequent screens bring the user through the Moodle introductory screens employing learner controls in consistent placements and with consistent functions (fig. 3.11). The 'Previous' option on each screen provides the ability to revise or repeat screens for retention or fluency.

See Appendix 2 for more samples of tutorial screens.
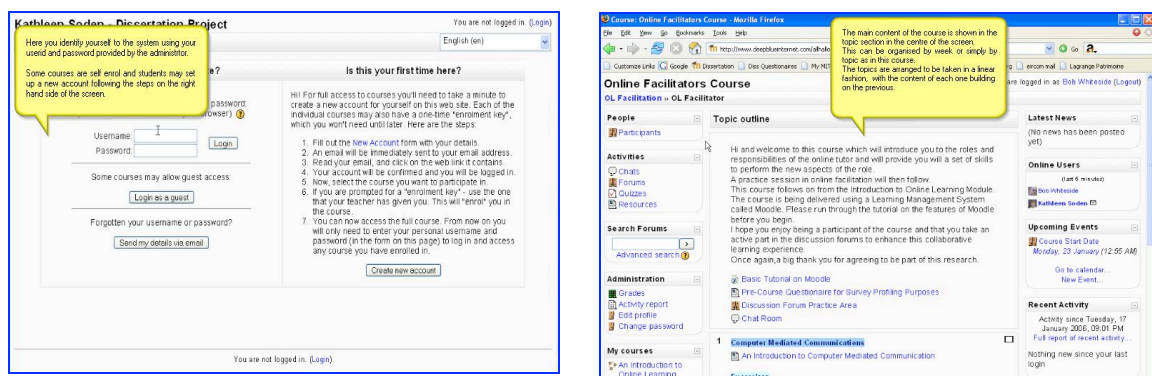
Figure 3.11 Sample of Tutorial Screens

Summary

This chapter described the design of the online learning experience based on the immersion model. It outlined the elements included in order to provide participants with content and practical experience of the online learning environment. It described the incorporation of the various CMC tools to allow participants develop practice in their effective use, the presence of the online facilitator presiding over the EDB's to model e-moderation skills and the participation in an online learning community to highlight its benefits.

The next chapter will detail the methodology and implementation of a case study which examines the implementation of the learning experience.

4. Methodology & Implementation

Introduction

This chapter outlines the case study research methodology used and defends its suitability for this project. It describes each of the data collection instruments used, and how in addition to providing qualitative data content, the various tools served to provide validity and reliability to the data collected. The method of data evaluation is described. Finally, the implementation of the project is outlined.

Case Study Methodology

The case study methodology is part of the interpretative school of research. As a methodology it has its origins in the field of sociology. A case study is concerned with striving toward a holistic understanding of systems of action. It observes effects in real contexts recognising that context is a powerful determinant of both cause and effects (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The case study can be seen to satisfy the three tenets of the qualitative method of research: describing, understanding and explaining. As a methodology it has many reported benefits but has always been subject to criticism due to its subjective nature. The benefits include its ability to provide deep insights into complex situations, its ability to represent and explore the discrepancies between viewpoints and its recognition of the context and embededness of social truths.

As data collected in the study is based on human observation, it is subject to weakness - the results do not lend themselves well to crosschecking, it has potential for observer bias and subjectivity, and a single case results may not support generalisations or have external validity. These weaknesses lie in the qualitative nature of the data collected, however, quantitative methodologies are not suitable for examining complex relationships as mere quantitative techniques will obscure some of the important information that the researcher needs to uncover.

Many academics have worked toward introducing structured research methodologies to the case study to counterbalance these weaknesses. Yin (1994) has detailed procedures to satisfy the required methodological rigour. He sets down a structured approach to planning case study research where the design determines the data to be collected as indicated by the

study's question, its proposition(s) and the unit of analysis. It should also outline what is to be done with the data after it is collected by linking the data to the proposition and stating the criteria for interpreting the findings. These planning stages were used during this study and are documented below.

The literature reports different types of case study. Yin categorises studies as exploratory, explanatory or descriptive, other authors describe them as descriptive, interpretive or evaluative (Cohen et al., 2000). The case study used in this project is explanatory or evaluative in nature, in that it attempts to examine a particular case to gain insight into a theory.

A particular benefit of the case study methodology which makes it suitable for this case is that the study represents a step in action (Cohen et al., 2000). The insights from the study may be directly put to use; for staff or individual self-development, or within an institution for formative evaluation and policy making.

Case Study Design

This study will address the question – In what way does the Immersion Model of training help faculty develop online facilitation skills ? It's proposition is that the immersion model is an effective way of training faculty in the skills required for online facilitation of ODL programs. It's unit of analysis is an online course designed using an immersion model. Data collected will be analysed using structured methodologies and the criteria for interpreting findings will be to measure whether or not participants developed online facilitation skills. This will measured in different ways – by recording participant views (post course questionnaire) and validating these (facilitator log and group interview), by examining the postings in electronic discussion forums for indication of an understanding of the skills and by examining recorded experiences of those who go on to facilitate.

Data Collection Instruments

The choice of data collection instruments used within a case study are determined by the qualitative nature of the study and so will record participant observations in a variety of ways so as to ensure triangulation of sources, perspectives and instruments. Multiple sources of data are used to provide reliability and to provide construct validity. Yin recommends three remedies to providing construct validity – to use multiple sources of evidence, establish a

chain of evidence and have a draft report reviewed by key informants (Yin, 1994). This approach has been adopted within this study.

A pre-course questionnaire collected mainly profiling information. The EDB postings provided a record of interaction and could be analysed for evidence of thought development and understanding. The post course questionnaire provided rich sources of qualitative information and participants own views on their learning. These were balanced by the facilitator log which provided another perspective. A focus group interview was held at the end of the course. This was done mainly to validate the data collected from other sources and it also yielded some rich data content. This approach provided for triangulation of instruments and sources, and the benefits of the approach is that one data collection form supplied strengths to offset the weaknesses of the other (Creswell, 2002).

Pre and Post Course Questionnaires

Information on the pre-course questionnaire was mostly of a profiling nature and was mainly for the benefit of the course facilitator to ensure that content was pitched at an appropriate level for the participants. (Appendix 3)

The post course questionnaire included both closed and open questions. The closed questions provided statements about the learning experience and participants were asked to respond to the statements using responses ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree on a likert rating scale. (Appendix 4)

Three open questions followed which prompted participants to provide detailed reasons for their responses to particular questions.

Discussion Forum Postings, Chat Room Log & Skype Recordings

The discussion forum postings were a core part of the learning experience and yielded both quantitative data indicating course activity and rich qualitative data recording progress and development. Chat room logs and Skype recordings also examined, although these were few in number.

Active Participant Log

This log was maintained by the online facilitator to provide another perspective on the progression of the study.

Follow up Interview

A focus group interview took place at the end of the study. The purpose of the interview was primarily to validate the information collected via the other tools and also to gain deeper

insights into the responses provided on the post course questionnaire. The statements which participants had scored on that questionnaire were reworded into question form. Each question was asked of the group and participants took turns to respond and discussion was encouraged.

Strategies for evaluating findings

The activity logs from the EDB forums and the user activity logs were examined and analysed to gain a picture of participant activity within the course. Data from the EDB posts were examined using the stages of exploration, coding text, developing descriptions, defining themes and connecting and interrelating the themes as recommended in Creswell's book on Educational Research (Creswell, 2002). This form of analysis is extended in a paper on methodological issues in content analysis of EDB postings (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). The approach advocated by those authors extends the purpose of content analysis to inferal hypothesis testing. This is valid approach when examining EDB content for evidence of learning taking place. However, its requirements of independent coders to provide for inter-rater reliability were thought to be excessive in this exercise of relatively small samples sizes and limited resources. A preliminary exploratory analysis was performed by reading all of the information collected. This was then examined and coded with codes developed into themes that addressed the major research questions.

Construct validity was achieved by attended to the steps recommended by Yin (1994). Triangulation of perspectives and instruments was provided. A chain of evidence was built examining whether the participant responses in the questionnaire and interview are corroborated by their EDB postings and by the facilitator journals. A draft report of findings was reviewed by participants.

In reporting findings, the researcher has attempted to allow events and situations speak for themselves rather than be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher as recommended (Cohen et al., 2000).

Context

The case study was undertaken in a third level college of theology that has not previously delivered online or blended learning programmes. During phase one of the study ten

members of faculty participated in the online course on online facilitation skills. In a second phase, four of those ten opt to create and facilitate their own online lesson.

The original ten participants represented a mix of age groups, genders and locations, with nine based locally and one abroad. Many of the participants are members of religious communities and this may be relevant to the cultural context of the study.

Ethics

A letter of request was sent to the selected participants, advising them of the purpose of the study and the form it would take. This also explained the manner in which the results would be presented. (Appendix 5).

Implementation

The study commenced with a group of ten participants. In phase one of the study the online course was delivered over a four week period. This was immediately followed by phase two when four participants went on to deliver and facilitate their own online lesson. This stage also lasted four weeks.

The course opened with a face to face session where local participants attended a short course initiation presentation. The presentation introduced the Moodle and Skype environments. A demonstration of posting to the discussion forums and initiating a Skype call was given, and participants were provided with a copy of the presentation overheads as notes (Appendix 6). Previous studies had established the benefits of the initial face to face session (Noakes, 2001). In addition all participants received a copy of a printed Student Guide introducing the Moodle environment (see Appendix 7). This was provided to cater for different learning styles in according with the principles of Kolb experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

The Moodle tutorial at the start of the course was used by all participants to familiarise themselves with the new environment. During the first week participants engaged in the online socialisation process, in week two they moved onto the online lessons. The facilitator checked the forum activity daily and where technical questions had been posed, answered these quickly to keep motivation high.

Of the ten participants who started the course, nine completed it. Four of these expressed an interest in facilitating their own online lesson. Two participants to jointly facilitate a lesson which was delivered to twelve students and two others to facilitate individual lessons. The individually delivered lessons were incomplete at time of writing. One was created but the facilitator who hoped to find a peer audience only found two students to participate. The final lesson is still in the planning stages, with the participant still collecting content for inclusion.

Summary

This chapter described and defended the case study methodology applied to examine the effects of the learning experience on participants. It explained the choice of data collection instruments used and how they worked together to provide construct validity to the study. It

explained the manner in which the data will be analysed and evaluated. The implementation of the learning experience was then outlined.

The next chapter presents the research findings and discusses their implications in light of the research question.

5. Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings, which result from the analysis of the data collected via the various data collection instruments outlined in the methodology chapter. A discussion follows which relates the implications of these findings to the research question, to what is reported in previous related studies and to the literature.

Summary Findings

The analysed data from the various data collection instruments indicates the suitability of the immersion model for the development of online facilitation skills.

The findings indicate that participants understood the importance of online communities and the process of creating and sustaining them. They used CMC tools extensively and in addition to gaining a competency with the technical aspects of the tools, showed an understanding of the benefits and limitation of each, which would lead to their effective use. Comments recorded in EDB postings and validated by the other collection instruments indicated that participants had grasped the importance of the e-moderator role and had a good understanding of the skills required to effectively e-moderate. This understanding was aided by the presence of the online facilitation role model and was further enriched by the experience of facilitating their own lessons.

The use of the case study approach yielded additional benefits not directly related to the research question but very beneficial to the individuals and institution where the study took place. Participants became familiar with the technologies employed and made additional uses of them. They formed an empathy with the online student and felt that as a result they would better serve them. Most importantly, participants reported that as a result of the experience they would be in a position to make more informed strategic decisions regarding the introduction of ODL into their institution.

Participant Profiles

Figure 5.1 shows the participant profiling information gathered during the pre-course questionnaire. The participants represented a mix of gender, age and technology experience. All participants were open to the potential of ODL. One participant had previous limited

experience in a online teaching capacity and several participants had negative responses in relation to their general level of comfort with technology.

Student	Gender	Years Teaching	Experience in OL Learning	Experience in OL Teaching	Favour OL	Personally Interested in delivering OL	Generally Comfortable with technology
A	M	30	No	No	Yes	Partly Agree	Partly Agree
B	M	3	Yes	No	Partly Agree	Partly Agree	
C	F	30	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Partly Disagree
D	M	5	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Strongly Disagree
E	M	20	No	No	Partly Agree	Partly Agree	Strongly Disagree
F	F	43	No	No	Yes	Yes	Partly Agree
G	F	20	No	No	Yes	Yes	Partly Agree
H	F	30	No	No	Yes	Yes	Partly Agree
I	M	7	Yes	Yes	Partly Agree	Partly Agree	Strongly Agree
J	F	30	No	No	Yes	Partly Agree	Strongly Agree

■ = Yes   ■ = No

■ =Strongly Agree   ■ = Partly Agree   ■ = Partly Disagree   ■ =Strongly Disagree   ⇨ = Neutral

Figure 5.1 Participant Profile Chart

Analysis and Presentation of Findings

The content of the EDB postings was analysed as outlined in Chapter 4 using content analysis techniques as recommended by Creswell (2002) and advanced in Rourke et al (2001). An examination of the data identified codes that were organised into the following common themes:- online community, online learning issues, the role of the facilitator, e-moderating concepts, pedagogical issues, CMC tools and the immersion model. Appendix 9 shows the complete list of codes and themes extracted from data. These themes are examined as part of the discussion below in conjunction with data collected from the other data collection instruments. Responses in relation to the impact of the Immersion Model are first discussed. These are followed by an examination of each of the areas below, highlighted in the literature and in the design chapter as those areas where the online facilitator needed to develop skills.

- Creating Online Communities

- Use of CMC Tools

- E-Moderating of EDB's

The Immersion Model as a way of Learning

In the post course questionnaire participants were asked to rate the success of the immersion model as a way of leaning online facilitation skills. The comments regarding the success of this model were positive. When provided with the statement

Being an online student, immersed in the environment I was learning about, has helped my understanding of the subject matter. Six respondents strongly agreed, and three partly agreed.

When elaborating one participant comment captured the essence of the approach

> Immersion enabled me to experience the theoretical content of the seminars directly. The learning that occurred was not limited to a conceptual framework of reference but also facilitated affective learning in relation to what it is really like to learn using OLE. It made the advantages and the disadvantages very evident. (Participant I) [questionnaire]

Other participants had similar responses in the open question

> I would never have achieved the level of understanding had I simply read up on what was involved. (Participant C) [questionnaire]

> I learned about how online learning happens practically and this has been extremely helpful. (Participant J) [questionnaire]

This view is borne out by the following comment extracted from an EDB posting, where the participant commented on the experience as it happened

> **Re: The role of the Online Facilitator**
> by   - Wednesday, 8 March 2006, 09:43 PM
>
> I really liked the way that we learned by immersion on this course. I have always in theory believed that its the best way to learn and it worked really well for me in this course.

During the group interview, participants corroborated this view. On the topic of delivery, some commented that they found the method transparent. They were not consciously aware that the medium and message were as one, but generally felt their understanding of the material was enhanced by the delivery form. One participant felt that if the information had been presented in another other form, they would not have related to it as well.

> If you had spoken to us about online learning, without delivering it as an online course, I would have seen that as an observer and possibly thought   - well that's interesting but it's for others who are more interested in computers. Actually having the exp erience made me realise, well that's possible, I think I could do that. Apart from demythologising the language, the concepts and everything became real by doing it. I may have eventually come to an understanding but I think it would have taken a lot l onger and not have been as rich an understanding. (Participant C)   [interview]

Other comments referred to the benefits of experiential learning and the constructivist approach to learning which are embodied in the immersion model.

> No amount of telling me how that might have operated would have worked for me, but actually doing and it and making mistakes etc was a huge help. (Participant C)   [interview]

The benefits of this approach concur with the literature and with the findings of previous studies in this area (Noakes, 2001; O'Reilly & Ellis, 2002).

The model did however pose a problem for one participant who joined the course later than others. The comment in the posting below raises a valid issue with the community of learning model of ODL.

Re: Use of Skype in the educational process ?
by   - Tuesday, 14 March 2006, 02:17 PM

My twopence worth; I have been slow to enter this arena - just due to pressure of work.

Now that i enter it, the 'tide' has passed. What others have written is interesting but leaves me isolated in my learning environment. Skype allows for an immediacy and real interaction (although I would be interested in learning how one would moderate it; what is the netiquette?)

When learning is collaborative in nature, the participants do need to take the lessons within the same time frame. This places restrictions on the self-paced nature of ODL. Thus, with this model it may be more appropriate to release each lesson on a timed basis to keep participants at the same point in the experience.

Building Online Communities

There was evidence that a healthy online community underpinned learning on this course. Participants posted regularly and there was a sense of shared adventure, an honest expression of opinion, an expression that learning was enhanced by the group setting and an evidence of concern and support for the community. The measurements used are defined by Collison et al. (2000).

The online socialisation process was served by the practice/ social electronic discussion forum, where participants posted introductions and general comments.

Figure 5.2 below shows a graph of course activity. The numbers represent the number of menus viewed by each participant and were sourced from the Moodle system logs. This graph in figure 5.3 shows the number of postings to the EDB forums for each participant.
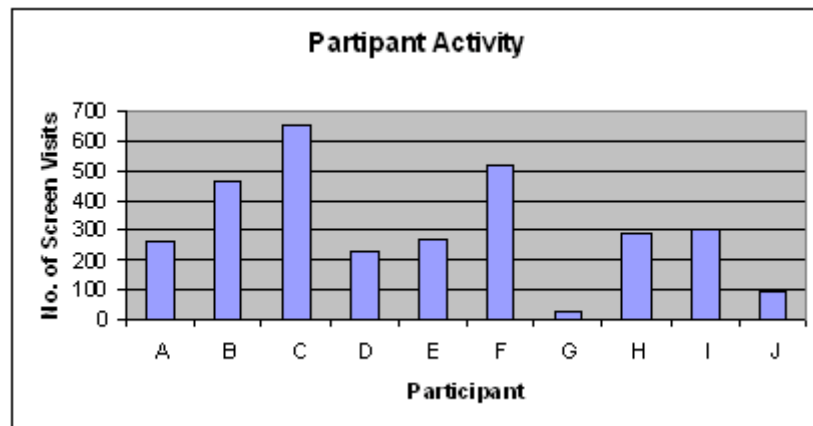
Figure 5.2 Course Participant Activity Graph
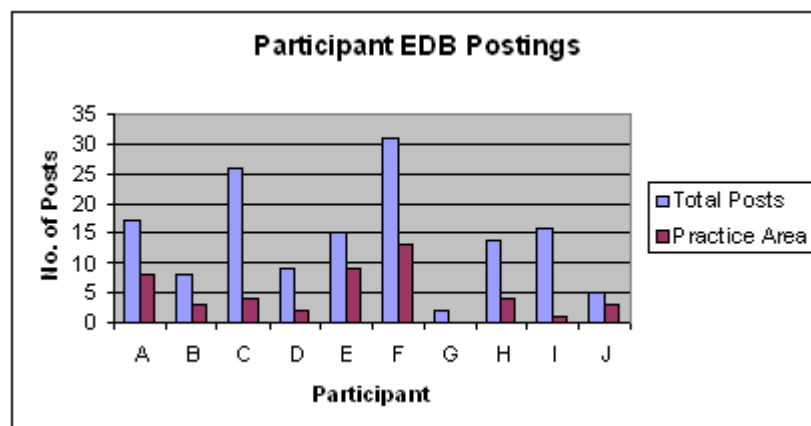
Figure5.3 EDB Participant Posting Graph

While most participants posted regularly, some were more active than others, and served as 'champions' who encouraged other participants. The literature on online communities supports the need for and benefits of such participants (Geer & Au, 2002).

As part of lesson content, participants read about the role of the online facilitator in creating and sustaining a healthy online learning community and the importance of the process of online socialisation (Salmon, 2003). Being part of this online community provided participants with a working example of the benefits of online socialisation in the creation of an active learning environment.   During the course of the program and in the interview afterwards, participants commented on aspects of the online community

> The social and fun element of it certainly helped the medicine go down! (Participant E)   [interview]

The EDB discussions also confirm that participants understood the importance of keeping communities alive and there was discussion regarding the best way to do this.

E-Moderating of Electronic Discussion Forums
by _____ - Wednesday, 1 March 2006, 10:42 AM

This article is a very concise overview of the topic which I found to be helpful. I am interested to see that some groups "wither". I can understand this happening as it easy to get caught up in other things and let the online learning go. I am wondering if it is important to return to the social stage of the process to re-motivate students again. I know that I need coffee facilitated nudge every now and again. I also am aware that I have not participated for a few days. I am wondering if people, who may have responded to anything I have posted feel somewhat "miffed" that this has not been acknowldeged.

Delete | Reply

Use of CMC Tools

The content of the CMC lesson in the course documented the difference between asynchronous and synchronous forms of CMC and the benefits and limitations of each type. This was complemented by the examples of each type of tool built into the course. Participants used the opportunity to explore each of these tools and became familiar with the benefits and limitations of each in a real sense. The activity logs show that the EDB's and Skype were actively used.

When presented with the following statement in the post course questionnaire

It was important to have an opportunity to experiment with the various forms of Computer Mediated Tools. All nine respondents strongly agreed.

The reasons for this overwhelming positive statement seemed to be borne out by comments of the participants in the open questions. In general it seemed that initial reservations about the use of CMC tools were soon removed.

> As someone who has something of a mental block around IT, it was very helpful to get such a clear introduction to the language, potential and limitations of CMC. (Participant E) [questionnaire]
>
> I feel a lot more comfortable with the possible positive us   es of Inter-active web encounters. Prior to the course emails were the extent to which I explored interaction on the web! (Participant C) [questionnaire]

Participants were enthusiastic about the addition of Skype to the set of CMC tools available for ODL and felt it had potential to overcome the limitations of some of the purely text based tools as evidenced in the following EDB postings:

Re: Use of Skype in the educational process ?
by   - Sunday, 26 February 2006, 10:00 PM

From the short experience of skyping with others in this module I thought that its real advantage was the immediacy of the responses and the naturalness of the communication. Everyone was involved. My experience of the Chat session on Moodle was that the exercise of typing distracted from the easy flow of conversation. Perhaps the Chat session is best used by two people. More than two can much more easily function on skype.

The experience of experimenting with the various CMC tools first hand seemed to equip participants with knowledge to form strategies for their own use of the various CMC tools.

Re: Use of Skype in the educational process
by   - Wednesday, 1 March 2006, 02:53 PM

In the little experience I have had with skype, I regard it as an excellent tool in online learning particularily on a one to one basis:

It can offer:
An individual approach, meeting the needs and explorations of a particular student
Immediacy and personal contact, albeit online
Combined with webcam one may certainly pick up nuances, reactions as the material is explored/discussed etc. and so adjust/question/ challenge accordingly.

Re: Reaction to CMC Learning
by   - Tuesday, 28 February 2006, 01:24 PM

It would seem to me that synchronous communication in its current predominatly text-based format is suited best to informal exchanges or, as Dorrie has suggested, one to one exchanges between the tutor and student. Perhaps a suitable forum for Q & A sessions regarding course description and periodic opportunities for students to raise questions with the tutor regarding key concepts etc. Discussion Boards seem to provide for the moment the best basis for promoting higher level reflection on learning objectives. Moreover, as a record of individual contributions is retained, it provides possibly a basis for assessment using qualitative analysis of content, either formally, as part of the formal assessment of a course, or informally, as a measure of student progress and apprehension of core course learning objectives.-

The discussion during the group interview confirmed that the opportunity to experiment with the various CMC tools had provided participants with confidence that they could use of such tools effectively if facilitating their own course, and that initial reservations regarding the quality of online communication were removed.
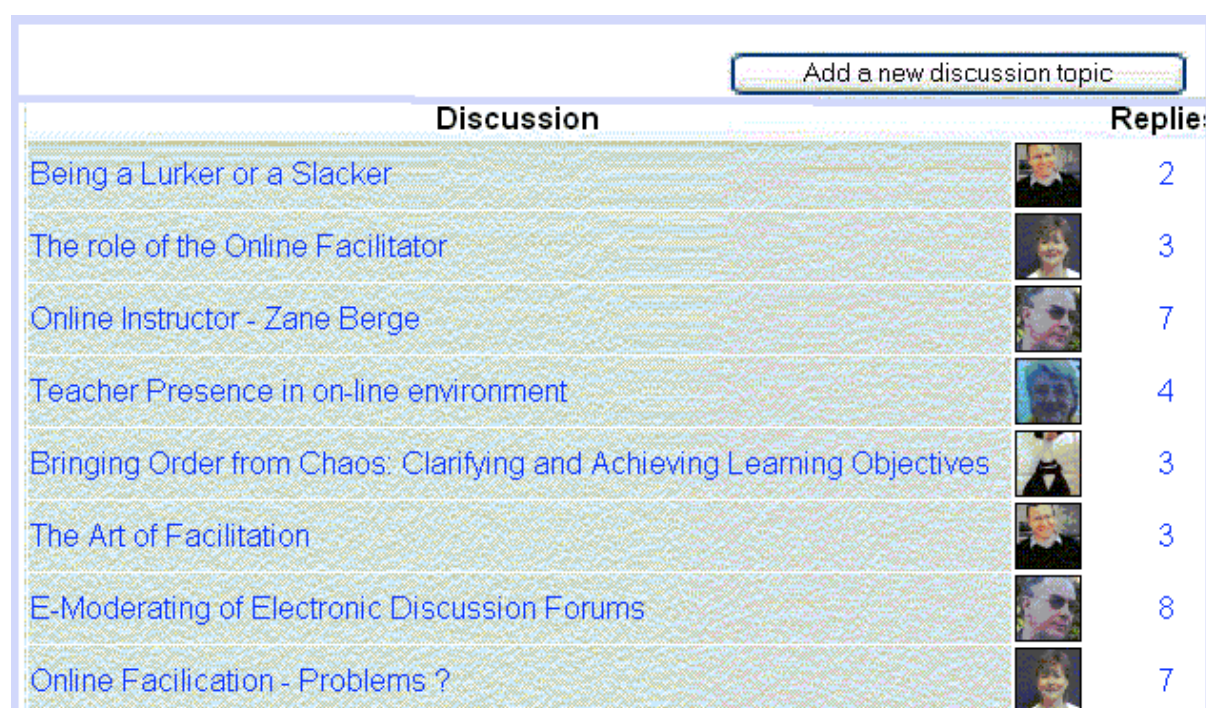
I previously thought that any online form of communication would have been cold and inhibit real communication – but found great value with the electronic discussion forums. (Participant C)   [interview]

E-moderating EDB's.

Lesson three of the course provided content on the e-moderation role of the online facilitator. Vgotsky(1978) documented the benefits of modelling required practices when he wrote on cognitive apprenticeship. It was hoped that by actively e-moderating the course discussion forums, the course facilitator would model and therefore reinforce those practices students read about in the content section.

The EDB discussion's on the role of the online facilitator was very active with many issues raised by and discussed among participants (fig. 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Sample Discussion Threads in Online Facilitation Forum

Participants seemed to grasp the many aspects of the e-moderation role, there were discussions on potential problem areas and possible solutions were proposed. There was an understanding that it was the effective moderation in this space that was the difference between technology delivered content and the creation of a rich interactive collaborative leaning environment.

There was also a lot of discussion concerning the time issues involved in active facilitation. Several times during the course of the project, participants voiced concerns regarding the increased workload that might arise from the delivery of ODL courses. This concern is well supported in the literature where it was seen as a major barrier to the introduction of ODL (Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 1999).

Participants also seemed to understand the importance about the timing of interventions and the tutor vs. student led conflict that appears in the literature was reflected in two EDB postings below.

The first comment recognised the need for students to discuss issues with each other without facilitator intervention and the second, while not debating that point, expresses concerns that without intervention the facilitator may be faced with the task of deconstructing misconceptions which developed over time.

Teacher Presence in on-line environment
by _____ - Tuesday, 7 March 2006, 10:14 AM

How soon do you intervene – doing so too soon would prevent a discussion between students and they would stop working and look to me for answers.

Bringing Order from Chaos: Clarifying and Achieving Learning Objectives
by _____ Monday, 6 March 2006, 05:03 PM

I've been reflecting on the the role of the facilitator. If EDBs are to form the basis of the process, it seems to me that a crucial skill would be, as described in the reading, the ability to excercise a high level of content analysis "sorting the wheat from the chaff" and being able to draw the attention of participants to points of information that emerge from student discussions that correlate closely with learning objectives.

The lack of immediacy in the learning process would mean that one would need to be constantly on top of this process which would be very demanding in terms of time and effort. If, for example, a facilitator did not participate for a number of days, they might be faced with the task of deconstructing misapprehensions or misappropriations of material that have been reinforced over an extended period of time perhaps some way back in a discussion thread. How could this be better managed?

Data from the post course questionnaire responses supports the view that participants had a good understanding of the role of the online facilitator and e-moderator. When responding to the following statement in the questionnaire

The course helped enhance my understanding of the role of the Online Facilitator

Six respondents strongly agreed, and three partly agreed.

Further exploration of this question during the focus group interview indicated that participants grasped the issues and most agreed that the presence of the online facilitator modelling the documented practice had reinforced learning for them.

> I enjoyed spotting how you as facilitator has set up and ran the lessons. (Participant C) [interview]

Those participants who went on to facilitate their own lessons reported that when confronted with issues during their own delivery, they were able to draw on the examples set to them by the online facilitator role model. It is interesting that when they described how they overcame e-moderating issues in their own delivery, it was not the literature that formed part of the lesson content which they referred to, but instead what they remembered were the practices employed by the online facilitator. This would appear to confirm the positive influence of the online facilitator role model, and contribute toward the justification of the Immersion Model. See Appendix 11 for extracts from participant facilitator journal.

> I was fascinated by how and when you made interventions, because I realised very early on that this would be crucial to the learning outcome. That was a good question for me to be asking myself. Another question I asked was – when do you move the discussio n on? I knew there were four stages we had to cover and there were different speeds at which people were taking the material – but I recognised that you had done this with us. You had said we are now hear and you pointed us to where we were going and wh at was coming next. Now I wonder how to bring it to closure. (Participant C) [interview]

> There were so many strands happening simultaneously, that it was very interesting to see how to manage these. You came in with clarifications at one level – and at the same time another level of the discussion may have been going on. The pace was not nece ssarily set by the slowest or neither was it set by the fastest learner but the moderating of the various strands that was something I would keep in mind in the future the ability to keep the various strands going. (Participant E) [interview]

Additional Findings

Additional benefits reported were that participants became comfortable with the Moodle and Skype technologies and felt they would use for other purposes when the study was over. Many participants also reported an empathy with the online student and felt that this would benefit the students they would go on to facilitate.

Most importantly it was felt that the participants, many of whom are decision makers in the institution where the study took place, developed an understanding of issues relating to ODL. As a result of the experience they would be in a position to make more informed strategic decisions regarding the introduction of ODL into their institution. One comment in the post-course questionnaire noted

> Furthermore, it has helped develop a core practical intelligence around the process of online learning that will enable better educational decision -making around its use, or indeed non -use, in relation to desired learning outcomes. (Participant I) [questionnaire]

A surprise finding was that the dropout rate very low when compared to statistics on ODL and to the results of other similar studies (Noakes, 2001). This may relate to length of the study, which because relatively short, kept motivation high. Another possible explanation may lie in the participant profiles. As members of religious orders have a vocational attitude to their roles, they were prepared to put time into the study outside of standard working hours.

Facilitator Observations

Although much of the literature highlights the "guide on the side" nature of the online facilitator role, this facilitator entered the forums more often than it seems the literature would advocate. There were various reasons for this. The project ran over a relatively short period and time to allow peer discussion was limited, so if a participant posed a question that was not picked up by another within a couple of days the facilitator entered to allow the conversation move on. Secondly, because of the technical nature of the content, some of the terminology and concepts caused participants to pose technical questions, the responses to which were required to allow them progress. Finally, the facilitator was attempting to exhibit good facilitation practice and provide real examples of the various practices outlined in the literature such as organising content, splitting discussions etc. and this involved entering the forums regularly.

In retrospective it would have been beneficial to have been more explicit about my own facilitation decisions. The discussion forum intended for such discussions was not used. Once participants went on to facilitate their own lesson they did not come back to post to the forum. The purpose and benefits of this forum were not flagged in advance and so there was a lost opportunity for peer collaboration on facilitation experiences.

Summary

This chapter presented and discussed findings of the case study undertaken. It reviewed participant's observations in relation to their online experience. It compared data from the various data collection instruments to satisfy the need for triangulation. It reviewed findings under the headings of online communities, use of CMC tools and e-moderating EDBs searching for evidence of participant understanding of the skills involved in each area. Participant observations were included as examples and other selected comments appear in Appendix 10. The final chapter will consider these findings and conclude the report.

6. Conclusion

Investigations into completion rates in ODL programmes highlighted good tutor facilitation and high levels of interactively as key to programme success. The literature identified the creation and sustainment of online communities, the creative use of CMC tools and the effective e-moderation of EDB's as core skills required by the online facilitator.

A case study examined the experience of ten members of faculty participated in on an online course designed to develop online facilitation skills and based on the immersion model. During the experience, faculty become online students themselves to learn the pedagogy and techniques of online facilitation. The course provided content and practical experience in those areas outlined above.

The data collected during the study was analysed and the findings that emerge suggest the suitability of the model for the development of online facilitation skills. Participants reported a positive response to the immersion model. Content was reinforced by delivery and participants learned by doing. They got to experience the effects of the theories they read about. They learned about online communities by being part of one, they learned about the effective use of CMC tools by using them and they learned about online facilitation and e-moderation by taking part in EDB's moderated by a facilitation role model. Participants engaged with and enjoyed the experience, and completion rates were high. Those who did go on to facilitate reported that having the opportunity to apply their learning had provided deeper insights and understanding of the role.

Limitations and Further Research
Due to time constraints of participants, time spent applying and evaluating the immersion model is short – it is intended to test theories and perhaps to identify areas for future research. Due to the sample size and the small number of participants who had the opportunity to go on and facilitate their own lesson, it is not possible to provide conclusive evidence that the model worked for all who completed the course. However, the findings are positive and concur with what is reported in the literature.

A recommendation for future development is to extend the duration of the course and make the step of facilitating a lesson compulsory for participants. More emphasis could be placed on the facilitator discussion forum and facilitation decisions should be explicitly noted with their reasons provided. The course could also be extended to provide other content relevant to the online facilitator such as Instructional Design methods.

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<u>Appendix 1 – Moodle Course Screens</u>

Appendix 2 – Online Tutorial Screens

Appendix 3 – Pre-Course Questionnaire

Appendix 4 – Post-Course Questionnaire

Appendix 5 – Request to participate in Research Study

January 7, 2006.

Dear X,

 As you know I am currently undertaking a part time Masters in TCD.

My course of study is titled MSc - IT in Education (MITE). This is my second year and it is mainly a research year during which I have to
- build a technology based system which provides an learning experience
- conduct a research project using the system and
- write up a thesis on the project.

I am looking for research subjects to take part in the project and this is where I hope you may come in.
I am including a document outlining the project in broad terms and would love to know if you are interested in taking part and becoming a 'Moodler'.

You can do this in two ways – firstly by taking the online course, contributing to the discussion forums and providing feedback on the experience; and secondly by taking it a step further and facilitating your own online lesson or 'moderating' an electronic discussion board (all things you will learn about).

Obviously the timing of this is important and my plan is that the online course would start in a weeks time and run approx. as follows:

Phase 1: Four weeks as a student of the online course

and then optionally

Phase 2:
One week   Preparing your own online lesson and getting volunteer students followed
by
Three weeks   Delivering your own online course

Can you please look over the attached document and let me know if you are interested in taking part. If you are interested, can you indicate if you would if you would like to do just one or both phases.

Finally, please be assured that all contributions to the research process will remain anonymous and you will not be identified individually in my report. However, due to the nature of the online learning course, your contributions to discussion forums do identify you, if you would prefer that I make these contributions anonymous also, please advise and I can do this.

Proposal: The Provision of Online Facilitation Skills via an Online Course.

> **Purpose:** To introduce participants to the pedagogy and technology of Online Learning and to teach the new skills required to facilitate an online distance learning (ODL) course.

> Participants *may* then go on to deliver an online lesson and practice 'moderating' an electronic discussion forum. The ability to do this will be dependent on time and student availability.

> This is not an attempt to **'pilot'** online learning for All Hallows College. Having said that, a definite spin off would be that participants get to use Moodle (a course management system used to deliver Online Learning) and Skype (the internet based telephony service) and to learn skills for the delivery of ODL.

Planned Format

1. **Participation as a student on an Online Course (approx. 4 weeks duration)**
   with topics including
- An Introduction to Online and Distance Education
- Computer Mediated Communication
- Online Facilitation Skills, E-Moderating etc.

   This participation would involve reading the lessons delivered and making contributions/ comments to an online discussion forum. It will also allow for experimentation with other forms of computer mediated communication i.e. Skype and conference calling via a web-cam.
   I will run an initiation session on the use of Moodle and Skype at the start of the project.

   > The second part to the research (and this part is optional) is

2. **Participant delivery of Online Lesson.** (you become the online facilitator)

   The plan here is that volunteer participants would create an online lesson based on a predefined template. The purpose of this step is to see if can you apply the skills you have learned and to allow you better evaluate how the immersion method of training helped prepare you.
   You will not learn how to use the technology to put the lesson together (we would not have the time). You would each collect/ prepare your material and I will sit down with each of you to put your lesson in place.

   Ideally, you should choose a lesson that is already prepared for classroom delivery so as to overcome time issues involved in collecting new material. An alternative here is that you could simply set an exercise for some students to supplement a class delivered module. For example if you deliver a face to face session and ask students to go online to discuss a particular topic with you managing the student interaction on discussion forums and doing all the good things you will learn about.

   To do this step will require a number of willing students. I can provide them with training on the use of Moodle. If I know you are interested in moving to this step, I will meet you to discuss details.

Appendix 6 – Course Initiation Presentation

Introduction to Moodle

Student Guide

Kathleen Soden
February 2006

Appendix 8 - Data Grid

Pre-Course Profiling Information

Name	Years teaching	experience in online learn	experience in online teach	experience with moodle	word	Powerpoint	internet	email
Par. A	30	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. B	30	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. C	5	Y	N	Y	Y	Y		Y
Par. D	20	N	N	N	Y		Y	Y
Par. E	43	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. F	3	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. G	30	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. H	20	N	N	N	Y	Y		Y
Par. I	7	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Par. A	30	N	N	N	Y		Y	Y

Post Course Closed Questions

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Name	Being immersed helped	Role of student	Better understanding content	Collaboration helped learning	Increased confidence in Moodle	CMC practice important	Online tutorial useful
Par. A	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. B	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Partly disagree
Par. C	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. D	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. E	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. F	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. G	Partly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree
Par. H	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Partly agree
Par. I	Partly agree	Partly agree		Neutral	Partly agree	Strongly agree	Strongly agree

Appendix 9 – Codes and Themes extracted during Data Analysis stage

Immersion Model	Learning on many levels Learning through experience How it happens practically Medium complementing the message Learning not limited to a conceptual framework
Online Community	Learning aided by participant support group Sense of fun Sense of shared adventure
Online Learning Issues	Problems when joining course late Increased confidence in potential of online learning More informed on ODL issues Comparisons with F2F teaching Better informed to make strategic decisions around ODL Empathy with online students
Understanding of role of O.F. Facilitator / E-Moderating Concepts	Concern over time issues to prepare content Concern over time required to facilitate ODL Timing of Intervention Placement of discussion forums Re-organising and splitting discussion content Dealing with bad discussion practices
Pedagogical Issues	Importance of content over technology Achieving Learner Objectives Asynchronous CMC more likely to develop Questions on Instructional Design, Online Assessment
Exposure and Practice with CMC	Variety of tools Confusion over amount of CMC tools Benefits and limitations of chat forum Use of Skype Benefits of Skype over chat room Suitability of tools for various situations
A Space to practice/ explore	Feeling comfortable with CMS technology Exploring the technology – adding pictures Querying other uses for the technology Discussing assessment features of CMS Space to explore

Appendix 10 - Selection of quotations from data collection instruments

On the Immersion Model

We were immersed in an online environment and our interest was avid to know more and to move on. The interaction never came dull or to a lull. After a short time we were /are up and going! I think that speaks for itself. [questionnaire]

The "immersion" aspect - I couldn't see myself reading my way into the experience. [questionnaire]

Starting from a base of being intimidated by technology…. Left to my own resources I would not have undertaken to consider or read into the idea of online leaning. Something about this about fun – adventure – encouragement – being part of a team – actually enjoyed it. [interview]

When one practices with what the have learnt, one begins to own the experience and when you make it your own you can use it in other situations.
Sense of fun, curious about other respondent postings. [interview]

For me the immersion worked – it shifted a lot of the old myths and resistances that I would have had around teaching and learning online. [interview]

Hands on invaluable – it's the real way that people learn.   Learning through the activities and the experience that informs us.   [interview]

The image in my mind – is you can write a set of instructions for someone about how to ride a bicycle and I might read it and be very impressed by it, but obviously getting up on it and trying to do it is where the real difference – [interview]

It has lessened the gap between the intimidation of the medium and the enthusiasm for the message. [interview]

I really liked the way that we learned by immersion on this course. I have always in theory believed that its the best way to learn and it worked really well for me in this course. [EDB Post]

On Facilitation / E-Moderating

The fact that individuals are all at different stages through the lessons can undermine somewhat the sense of a shared learning experience. The counter this, the role of the online facilitator would seem to be absolutely crucial. [questionnaire]

I would be interested in pursuing work as if an online facilitator. [questionnaire]

I realised that I was building into how I was working material, what had blocked me in the beginning. Things that I knew had the potential to confuse me.
It became clear to me when I went onto do it. [interview]

I did find the clarifications that came from someone with knowledge of the bigger picture very useful as they advanced my learning into areas I may not have thought about or could not have articulated a question on myself.   [interview]

I was confusing you in a double role – and saw you as the technical help rather than the online facilitator – it was a built-in issue.   [interview]

You as the moderator you kept the ball rolling, you reminded me of the Wizard of Oz keeping it all together, even when in the background. You also challenged us and it was good to see. [interview]

I would find it hard to see how I would have learnt from the course if the facilitated were not a content expert. [interview]

Language can intimidate, and so it reminded me to keep my language accessible to all. I got an appreciation of making sure to make the associated literature spot on – it may be easy to source some online content – but frustrating from a student point of view to have to read all to get at one point. [interview]

The lesson for the facilitator is to make sure that someone is really just a Lurker and not a Slacker, and the facilitator needs to be able to tell the difference [EDB Post]

Being able to enthuse students around the technology and, more importantly, around course content via the technology is perhaps crucial. Similarly, comunication skills relating specifically to the uniqueness of the online learning environment are very important. For example, the ability to moderate student discussions on topics and ensure the participation of all students. A final skill, and for me perhaps the most important, is the ability to 'humanise' the environment and where possible, to creatively compensate for what is lost through a lack of physical presence. [EDB Post]

The idea of the online instructor as a model of effective teaching - especially the idea that she/he has a social role. It kind of humanizes the whole business.   [EDB Post]

Anyway, I found much of interest in the Berge article. Along with x, I thought the emphasis on the learning goals, over and above the technology a good reminder to keep the focus on the educational aspect of the whole process and not get distracted by the bells and whistles. [EDB Post]

On Online Communities
I was learning by doing and reflecting on the process. Engaging with others allowed me to clarify my own thoughts and to learn from the experience and knowledge (not to say mistakes) of others.   [questionnaire]

On CMC
It was really good having to experiment to figure out the different uses of the forum, the relative value of Skype viz-a-viz the chat room, the importance of the choice of resource materials etc.   [questionnaire]

I appreciated the genuine exploration within the discussion forums of the questions and reservations as well as of the potential of CMC and the way in which thia was encouraged and responded to by the facilitator. [questionnaire]

I found the balance in the tutorials and in the supplementary articles referred to with regard to both the potential and limitations of CMC was very helpful in allaying some of my own initial fears and reservations. The fact that the "gurus" are critically aware of and freely acknowledge these issues inspires more confidence. [questionnaire]

Demythologising some of the language. Seeing what a chat room was, and indeed seeing some of the limitations – then going on to see Skype and how it could overcome some of those limitations. [interview]

However, I believe it is possible to adapt communication within the online learning environment creatively to achieve this complex level of communication. I think it would be interesting to discuss how this might be done.   [EDB Post]
Other
I would like also to explore the possibility of on-line evaluation / assessment of such a course.   [questionnaire]

I had a particular interest in participating in this - to do with its potential for delivering, of facilitating, an on-line distance learning programme of "Bridging Studies". I feel that I am much clearer now on the issues involved in such an undertaking and also much more confident about setting it up. [questionnaire]

I have a healthy empathy with those students on whom I may one day experiment ...! [questionnaire]

Appendix 11 – Extracts from Faciliator Journal of Participant

Have spent a lot of time moodleing now-! Some insights!

Sorting out structural issues (i.e. correct use of forum, when a posting is a reply and when it is a new posting etc) paid off. Students are now posting appropriately.

I'm not sure that my use of powerpoint was good. I used it for a reflective purpose but by its nature I suspect the technical nature of the exercise may have been distracting for a more reflective engagement. I'm not sure but have posted a question to the participants to gauge response. Will let you know!

I'm convinced that this methodology is good for Revision purposes. I think it will also work for bridging studies.

I have compared the forum discussion on-line with our *seminar groups*. These are small groups that meet weekly to discuss content of modules. I think that the on-line forum definitely is more effective as students have to 'think out' what they've learned as there is a record! With the live seminar situation there is greater potential for bull! Often the student hasn't even read the material and can spoof away!

As facilitator one of my questions was about when to interject. I agreed to post about every 4 days. However I went on site every day to see how things were going. Eventually I worked out that *technical interventions* were important immediately I noticed confusion but *content intervention* was not, as students sorted each other out and this made for far better learning. I drew attention to that and it got even better!

The students have been very positive in their feedback, they found it a stimulating experience. i still have to elicit a specific evaluation of the facilitation.

Even students who previously had very limited computer experience managed it well and are using it confidently.

I'd like to find more uses for this type of peer learning but am conscious of the time involved, particularly in getting really appropriate material. When in a classroom one can fill in the gaps because from students responses one can see what is missing. If a particular student on-line has a false brick in their foundation wall in terms of a particular topic it may be harder to spot this on-line. (Not sure about that!)

Finally, I could and would like to work, in a limited way with on-line programmes!