## University of London International programmes

## Centre for Distance Education (CDE)

**centre for distance education:**

**teaching and research awards**

Selected papers prepared and summarised by Dr Clare Sansom,

CDE Fellow

October 2011

**The Centre for Distance Education (CDE)** is a University of London International Programmes initiative set up in 2005 to promote collaboration and knowledge-sharing in distance education, and to support the development of expertise in this field within the University of London and its Colleges.

The CDE supports a community of practice and provides a focus for the development of high quality teaching and research in distance education throughout the federal University of London. The work of the Centre is supported by a network of educational practitioners, researchers, experts and specialists dispersed throughout the University. The central staff team coordinates these activities and resources, and provides professional advice either directly or via others within the network.

Activities of the CDE include the following:

• Annual Teaching and Research Awards: research grants supporting original pedagogic research studies that can provide evidence for innovative and effective practice in distance and technology-enhanced learning, teaching and assessment

• Annual Research in Distance Education conference: The CDE hosts an annual conference at Senate House, University of London looking at new directions and developments in distance learning

• Regular seminars and workshops: we run special interest seminars and workshops all year round related to diverse aspects of distance learning, including technology innovations, pedagogy and teaching and learning

• CDE Fellowships: drawn from the University of London and beyond, our network of Fellows support and guide the work of the Centre and promote intercollegiate collaboration and knowledge sharing in the field of distance education.

This booklet presents summaries of the outcomes from a selection of research projects conducted on behalf of the CDE and funded through the Teaching and Research Awards between 2005 and 2010. We have our next round of funded projects currently underway, and details of these (along with a brief review of CDE activities during 2010-11) can be found at the back of the book.

We hope that you find these research summaries interesting and informative. More details of individual projects and all our activities are available on the CDE website (www.cde.london.ac.uk) or by contacting us via email (cde@london.ac.uk).

If you have any other questions please let us know!

Best wishes

Dr Hugh Starkey

Chair of the CDE Fellows

**This booklet presents summaries of a selection of projects funded under the Centre for Distance Education’s Teaching and Research Awards programme between 2005 and 2009. It is divided into three sections, reflecting the three strands at the 2011 CDE Fellows’ Conference: Design for Learning, Supporting Teaching and Learning, and Evaluation and Assessment. Each short summary comprises an abstract, a research summary and a selection of research outputs and references.**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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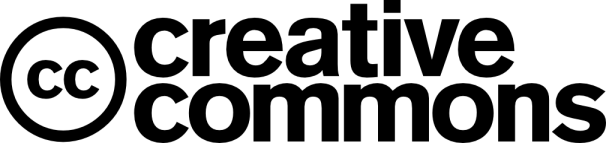
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**DESIGN**

**FOR LEARNING**

**Formulating and Testing Guidelines for Online Learning in support of Mathematics Learning in a Diverse Student Group**

Martin Anthony, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE

Jan van den Heuvel, James Ward, Mark Baltovic, London School of Economics

Keywords: e-learning, mathematics, pedagogy, web 2.0

Date of Final Report: November 2008

**Abstract**

Students on distance learning courses in mathematical disciplines often find it harder to grasp complex concepts than their peers educated face-to-face as they lack regular one-to-one support from tutors. This project involved the creation of a number of small-scale discrete web based “micro-sites” or “virtual tutors”, each designed to teach a single topic within mathematics. These provided structured exercises that could, as far as possible, emulate a human tutor’s ability to help a student diagnose a problem in their conceptual understanding, resolve it and then consolidate what they had learned. The first sites were made available for student testing, and the students’ response tested through questionnaires and a focus group, and they were generally well received. This approach may be readily adapted for use in any quantitative discipline.

**Research Summary**

Twelve micro-sites or “virtual tutors” were designed and developed in order to help students on distance learning courses involving mathematics understand and consolidate complex mathematical concepts. Each micro-site covered one discrete topic taught within the London University External System’s courses Mathematics 1 and Mathematics 2. The range of topics included basic algebra, partial differentiation and its applications, aspects of matrix manipulation, and calculations involving tax. The exercises were designed to go beyond the “multiple-choice quizzes” often offered in web-based mathematics education, with a non-linear progression through the exercises: the students were offered a pathway based on their initial responses and so enabled to repeat and consolidate knowledge where necessary.

The first seven micro-sites to be completed were made available to students for testing. Student response was evaluated through questionnaires and a focus group. The micro-site technology also allowed student progress through the sites to be monitored. Qualitative feedback indicated that the micro-sites were generally well received and that the students felt that they enabled them to understand the concepts and consolidate their knowledge. However, much further work will be needed before these specific topic-based resources can be integrated into a full-scale discipline-wide “virtual tutor”. The concept is applicable to almost any quantitative discipline, but both pedagogical and discipline specific knowledge and experience will be needed to design sites in the context of the most common student misconceptions and errors.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Serving Maths / Assessment Tools in Mathematics. Project report from the University of York, UK. <http://maths.york.ac.uk/yorkmoodle/course/view.php?id=70>
* WALLIS Project report: Web-based Assistant for Learning; an on-Line Intelligent System. University of Edinburgh, UK. <http://www.maths.ed.ac.uk/~wallis/>
* MathML 2.0. <http://www.w3.org/Math/>

*Outputs*

* Ward, J. (2009). A move towards virtual tuition for distance learning in mathematics. Presentation at CDE Fellows’ Conference, *Research in Distance Education: from present findings to future agendas,* London, February 2009
* Presentation at workshop on the use of ICT in first-year mathematics teaching, London School of Economics, 2009
* All fully developed micro-sites are being made available for evaluation and testing. Please contact Martin Anthony [m.anthony@lse.ac.uk](mailto:m.anthony@lse.ac.uk) or the CDE for further information.
* A full description of the project outcomes has been made available as an appendix to the formal project report. Please contact the CDE for further information.

**Achieving Interactivity in Online Learning of Auditory and Articulatory Skills**

Michael Ashby, Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT

Jill House, Mark Huckvale, John Maidment and Kayoko Yanagisawa, University College London

Keywords: phonetics, interactivity, e-learning

Date of Final Report: May 2010

**Abstract**

Phonetics, or the study of the sounds of human speech, can be a difficult subject to teach online and at a distance because it relies so heavily on audio. Michael Ashby and his colleagues at University College, London have developed an introductory course in phonetics, PHONLINE, that is delivered via the college VLE and available to distance-learning students. Building on this success, they have now developed a set of interactive exercises using pre-recorded listening material that can be incorporated into this and more advanced courses, using audio and video tools and VoIP (voice over Internet protocol). These were tested with students and classified using a self-defined set of interactivity levels as Level 2 out of 3, and have been made more widely available in a Moodle course in Practical Phonetics.

**Research Summary**

Interactive feedback is critical for students to acquire skills in phonetics. However, the concept of interactivity has been surprisingly poorly developed. This project involved evaluating the current range of e-learning resources in phonetics available at UCL, and developing some more interactive exercises for training the ear to recognise and discriminate between different vowel and consonant sounds. A range of tools and technologies were tested and the choice of VoIP as a standard tool to augment the VLE was made after considering the limitations of system cost, bandwidth and the performance of the students’ own computer systems. This was tested successfully in an intercontinental context.

The resources produced through the project were tested thoroughly and assessed as being more interactive than those previously available, and they were taken up enthusiastically by students. They have been built into online course materials that can be used in existing courses and as a stand-alone course or reference resource in sound identification, and remained robust when the college VLE was changed to Moodle. However, the design and authoring of the materials was very labour intensive, and more automation of the authoring process would be required to make it fully cost effective. Although the choice of VoIP removes some of the problems with cost and bandwidth from the students’ perspective, students still experience varying performance as a result of differences in connection speeds and in the hardware available.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Ashby, M., House. J., Huckvale, M., Maidment, J. and Yanagisawa, K. (2007). A distance e-learning course in phonetics, *Proceedings of the XVI International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, Saarbrueken, Germany, pp. 1713-1716.
* Ashby, M., House, J., Huckvale, M., Maidment, J. and Yanagisawa, K. (2007). Phonetics in a virtual learning environment. *Proceedings of the Phonetics Teaching and Learning Conference (PTLC2005)*, UCL, London, UK, pp. 62-127.
* Yacci, M. (2000). Interactivity Demystified: A Structural Definition for Distance Education and Intelligent CBT. <http://www.ist.rit.edu/~may/interactiv8.pdf>

*Outputs*

* Ashby, M. (2008). New directions in learning, teaching and assessment for phonetics. *EFE XVII*, pp. 17-44.
* Ashby, M., Yanagisawa, K., Kim, Y.S., Maidment, J. and Przedlacka, J. (2009). Achieving interactivity in the online learning of phonetic skills. http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/ptlc/ptlc2009/ptlc2009-proceedings/ptlc2009\_ashby\_015\_ed.pdf
* Invited talk, Barcelona, Spain, December 2008 (published as Ashby (2008) above)
* Report, *Achieving interactivity in online learning of phonetic skills* presented at Phonetics Teaching and Learning Conference, University College London, UK, August 2009
* Moodle course, “Practical Phonetics”, available to students on a wide range of programmes at UCL
* Copies of some papers and presentations have been made available as an appendix to the formal project report. Please contact the CDE for further information.

**London Pedagogic Planner: User-oriented Support Tools for Learning Analysis and Design**

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London WC1N 3QS

Jonathan P. San Diego and research team, London Knowledge Lab

Keywords: design, pedagogy, planning, teacher support

Date of Final Report: December 2007

**Abstract**

Many academics lack institutional support for teaching development and find it difficult to find the time and resources to explore deeply the pedagogical implications of new technologies available for use in their teaching. This project involved the development of a prototype online tool, the London Pedagogy Planner, to help lecturers make fuller use of the technologies available and include good pedagogy in their lessons. Crucially, it did not require users to understand pedagogical theory in order to make use of it. A prototype Pedagogy Planner was made freely available during the project and further resources are now available at [www.lkl.ac.uk/research/LDSE/](http://www.lkl.ac.uk/research/LDSE/) under the title “Learning Design Support Environment”. The resources available are rich and versatile and can be readily modified by users of most platforms.

**Research Summary**

The London Pedagogy Planner (LPP) was developed and prototyped as a tool to help lecturers in higher education make use of established pedagogic practice in planning their teaching. They are usually experts in their own subjects rather than in teaching. At the start of the project, the available visual tools for planning lessons were reviewed to establish the important issues and create a list of visualisation and design features to be included. Lecturers in a number of disciplines at London-wide institutions were consulted during the design process, which also incorporated Laurillard’s Conversational Framework for pedagogic design. Prototype planners were evaluated by practising lecturers throughout the project.

The Planner was made available for download and testing by the higher education community during the project, and it has now been incorporated into the more extensive Learning Design Support Environment project (<https://sites.google.com/a/lkl.ac.uk/ldse/>), which is funded through the TLRP-TEL Programme. The full LPP resource included tools for designing and planning teaching at both the module and the session level; it is flexible and can be readily modified by users. Evaluation carried out during development indicated that lecturers appreciate the value of the tool and were willing to devote time and resources to its continued development. Several are now involved in the follow-up LDSE project.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Conole, G., Littlejohn, A., Falconer, I., and Jeffery, A. (2005). *Pedagogical review of learning activities and use cases*. LADIE Project Report: JISC e-Learning Programme.
* Laurillard, D. (2002). *Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies* (2nd ed.). Routledge Falmer, London.
* Laurillard, D., and McAndrew, P. (2003). *Reusable educational software: a basis for generic learning activities.* In A. Littlejohn (Ed.), Reusing Online Resources: A Sustainable Approach to e‐Learning. Kogan Page, London.

*Outputs*

Papers:

* Laurillard, D. (2007) ‘Modelling benefits‐oriented costs for technology enhanced learning’ *Higher Education,* **54,** 21‐39.
* Laurillard, D. (2008). The teacher as action researcher: using technology to capture pedagogic form. *Studies in Higher Education* **33(2)**, 139 -154
* San Diego, J.P., Laurillard, D., Boyle, T., Bradley, C., Ljubojevic, D., Neumann, T., and Pearce, D. (2008). Towards an analytical approach to learning design. *ALT-J,* **16(1)**, 15-29

Conference Keynotes[[1]](#footnote-0):

* ‘Learning Design as a foundation for the future success of e‐learning’. European LAMS Conference, University of Greenwich, July, 2007.
* ‘Collaboration between standards‐makers and practitioners in Learning, Education and Training’, Global Leadership & Governance of ICT standards for learning, education & training, London, March 2007.
* ‘Pedagogic Planning Support for Lecturers’, First International LAMS Conference, University of Sydney, December 2006.
* ‘Working with and Learning from Pedagogical Expertise’, MERLOT International Conference, Ottawa, August, 2006.
* ‘Effective Learning Technology Design: Engaging the Professionals’, 4th International Lifelong LearningConference, Central Queensland University, June 2006.

Website: [www.lkl.ac.uk/research/LDSE/](http://www.lkl.ac.uk/research/LDSE/)

Please contact Diana Laurillard [D.Laurillard@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:D.Laurillard@ioe.ac.uk) or the CDE for a list of further outputs including workshops and conference presentations.

**Templates for Teaching and Learning**

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Keywords: e-learning, pedagogy, study skills, templates

Dates of Final Reports: Project 1 March 2007; Project 2 November 2007

**Abstract**

Teaching and Learning templates are planning resources used by teachers and Learning Technologists to design and prepare teaching materials, and prompt students to work through their learning. They are not discipline specific but apply pedagogical principles generically, and may use any available and appropriate tools. They can be applied traditionally in classrooms or in e-learning environments. These two linked projects (2005-6/2006-7) involved the creation of a large number of such templates, first for teaching and second for learning. They were presented as frameworks to stimulate thinking about learning and teaching goals especially in UK higher education. Teachers and trainers of teachers involved in the projects found that their participation in discussions enabled them to think more clearly and deeply about pedagogy and course design.

**Research Summary**

The initial idea behind templates is similar to those used in Microsoft Office, for instance Microsoft PowerPoint, a popular template tool. They are an aspect of the fundamental intellectual process of pattern recognition. Patterns are in many ways a limiting factor, but their very limitation makes them at the same time generative and transformative. In the case of teaching and learning templates built for the CDE projects, they enable teachers to approach teaching in a systematic way, and yet to ring the changes for infinite variety at any point in the teaching process. For learners, the benefit is that the goals, content, activities and feedback mechanisms become more obvious and are therefore likely to engender better acquisition and revision methods.

These two linked projects involved the creation of two sets of templates, the first for teaching and the second for learning, in collaboration with teachers and trainers of teachers at the Institute of Education and Middlesex University. The teaching templates included an initial set designed to introduce users to the idea of templates, case studies, and the use of ICT, graphs, charts and literature reviews in teaching. The learning templates, developed with significant input from students, focused mainly on <learning-to-learn> study skills. An inspection of learning skills efforts by universities revealed that students were not motivated to devote time to study skills. They rarely either attended the guidance courses on offer, and even more rarely took note of the websites summarising learning skills. This confirmed the need to assist HE teachers to adjust their pedagogy so as to prompt student learning more effectively. Well applied templates can do this. In the system produced by the projects, it became clear that the essential elements of all teaching and learning processes could be reduced to three major categories, content, activities, and feedback, and that these three can be manipulated during any teaching-learning phase so as to encompass a wide range of teaching approaches (e.g. discovery or problem based) and an infinite range of tools whether for classroom or e-learning contexts.

Data collection and analysis was done in the second project using an innovative ‘profiling approach’ that analysed respondents feedback in themes of eLearning content, communication, learning theory and management. A software toolkit represented the output in numerical and graphical format.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Alexander C (2002) The Nature of Order New York: Oxford University Press, <http://www.math.utsa.edu/sphere/salingar/Chris.text.html>, and <http://g.oswego.edu/dl/pd-FAQ/pd-FAQ.html>).
* Basiel, A. (2007), ‘ePedagogy for virtual learning environments’ – Doctoral Thesis: https://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0B5KEPSFKjo5OMDUxYTdjOTUtM2I0NC00OWMxLThmYzItNmFhNTk5ZWY3ODMz&hl=en
* [Bergin](http://www.pedagogicalpatterns.org/people/right.html" \l "jb), J. (n.d.) Fourteen pedagogical patterns <http://csis.pace.edu/~bergin/PedPat1.3.html>
* Collis, B. and Moonen, J. (2001) F*lexible Learning in a Digital World: experiences and expectations*, London: Kogan Page.
* Fincher S (1999) “Analysis of Design: An Exploration of Patterns and Pattern Languages for Pedagogy” Journal of Computers in Mathematics; Special Issue CS-ED Research, 18(3):331-348, December 1999.
* Pedagogical Patterns Project <http://www.pedagogicalpatterns.org>
* RACE P (2005) Making Learning Happen, London; Sage PowerPoint™ presentation on his alternative "ripples" model <http://www.phil-race.com/downloads.html>
* University of London – Student Study Skills:   
  <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/services/facilities/support>

*Outputs*

The templates were initially mounted on dedicated websites at the Institute of Education but became unavailable when that website was redesigned. It is hoped shortly to create a new website for them. Intending users should now contact Anita Pincas directly at [a.pincas@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:a.pincas@ioe.ac.uk).

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**Developing Course Team Approaches to Online Task Design**

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Keywords: course teams, e-learning, task design, teacher support

Date of Final Report: March 2009

**Abstract**

The success of distance e-learning is particularly dependent on the quality and nature of the tasks that students are expected to undertake. This project set out to investigate how course team members with different subject and pedagogical skills work together on the design of courses and tasks. Course teams involved with distance learning in different institutions and disciplines were involved; staff members were interviewed and student views sought through questionnaires and focus groups. The project produced overviews of pedagogic factors that course teams should consider, and of aspects of teamwork that were conducive to successful task design.

**Research Summary**

Distance e-learning students can suffer if the tasks they are set are of poor pedagogical quality, such courses offer few opportunities for informal clarification type interactions with tutors. Furthermore, most lecturers have little experience of distance e-learning either as a student or a tutor. This study investigated how working in a multi-disciplinary course team can aid lecturing staff, particularly inexperienced ones, in course and task design. Three courses from different institutions – the Master of Teaching (MTeach) at the Institute of Education, a Business Studies Degree at London Metropolitan University and a course in Diabetes in Primary Care at Kings College London, were selected for the study. These are all established courses with both face-to-face and distance components (“blended learning”) and incorporate e-learning.

Both the tutors’ and the students’ perspectives on task design were obtained using a combination of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and a focus group. This allowed a critical comparison of staff pedagogy with student experience that enabled the results to be generalised across disciplines. Key findings from the project were incorporated into a model for course and task design that will be of potential use to teams in any discipline and higher education setting.

It became clear that the student’s own professional educational context needs to be central to the design of tasks. These contexts can be shared by participants to encourage interaction and collaboration. This combination allows benefits of both situated and socially constructed learning.

Course team experiences of designing online components were clearly influenced very strongly by time as a resource. Successful teamwork requires collaboration; meaningful collaboration of all stakeholders requires time. Design was more successful where existing models of tasks were available, where there was a shared course ethos and there was active course centred research within the team.

This TRA project has been a springboard for further research which focuses on what student’s value in online discussions and how this is facilitated by pedagogic design. It has identified the importance of design in enabling:

* Practitioner focus, where practical issues and problems can be discussed openly.
* Community development, which features trust, sharing, support and in turn encourages inquiry and critical thinking.
* A writing process, which gives students space and time for deeper and more analytical reflection.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Beetham, H. (2004) *Review of e-learning models for the JISC practitioner communities.* JISC E-learning and Pedagogy Programme Report.
* Laurillard, D (2002). *Rethinking University Teaching, a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*, Routledge Falmer, London.
* Mishra, P. and Koehler, M. J. (2006), 'Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge: A Framework for Teacher Knowledge'. *Teachers College Record,* **106(6)**, 1017-1054

*Outputs*

* Presentations of the project results were given in the following forums:
  + Poster presented at CDE Fellows’ Conference “Research in Distance Education: from present findings to future agendas”, London, UK, February 2009
  + Seminar presentations/discussions at the London Knowledge Lab and the Centre for Excellence in Work-based Learning for Education Professionals (WLE Centre)
  + Paper/Poster presented at the Association for Learning Technologies conference 2009 (Alt-C), Manchester, UK, September 2009
  + Poster presented at CDE Conference “Research in Distance Education; impact on practice”, London, UK, October 2010
* The full project report and a poster that summarizes the findings of the project and suggests course development activities for staff and students are available from Adam Unwin [a.unwin@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:a.unwin@ioe.ac.uk) or from the CDE.

**A Study into the use of Weblogs as a Dialogic Tool for supporting Communication, Community, Collaboration and Social Presence in Distance Learning Environments**

Steven Warburton, King’s College, University of London, The Strand, London WC2R 2LS

Fitri Mohamad, Institute of Education

Keywords: blogs, e-learning, social software, web 2.0

Date of Final Report: November 2008

**Abstract**

The blog (weblog) is one of the most popular and universal of the Internet tools that are grouped under the term “Web 2.0”. In this early project into the use of blogs in education, students and tutors of War Studies at King’s College London were each directed to set up and keep a blog for a year. Blog use was monitored during the year although the blogs were not formally assessed. The students’ use of the blogs was found to be very variable with some becoming enthusiastic bloggers while others contributed only rarely; not surprisingly, students’ prior exposure to the technology was an important predictor of their level of use. However, almost all students found that the blogs enhanced their learning. A comprehensive review of the use of blogs in education was produced to complement the longitudinal study.

**Research Summary**

Although blogs – or, as they were formerly known, weblogs – are now widespread, relatively little research has even now been carried out into their utility in education. This project set out to explore how blogs kept by both students and tutors could support communication and develop community in an online MSc course in War Studies at King’s College, London. Thirty-five students and three tutors on this course were directed to set up blogs using the free tool, Blogger, and maintain them throughout the year. Blogs were linked together and into the college’s virtual learning environment using Bloglines. The students’ and tutors’ use of blogs was evaluated reflectively, using a model based on Community of Inquiry

In general, students and tutors found their blogs a useful tool although the use they made of them varied. The students’ pre-conceptions of blogging influenced their use of the tool. Some students had particular questions regarding privacy and identity. Reflecting on the students’ experiences led to the development of a set of guidelines for the educational use of blogs that could be applied in wider contexts. These suggested that blogs could add value in distance and lifelong learning preferably in the context of a larger body of work in an e-portfolio; that students’ background, digital literacy and prior expectations will always affect the use they make of the tool; that there will always be a tension between public and private data that will need to be addressed; and that the use of blogs by tutors as well as students can be a positive one.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

Blood, R. (2002) *We’ve Got Blog: How Weblogs are Changing our Culture.* Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Laurillard, D. (2002) *Rethinking university teaching: a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies* (2nd ed.): Routledge Falmer.

Williams, J. and Jacobs, J. (2004) Exploring the use of blogs as learning spaces in the higher education sector. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, **20(2)**, 232-247.

*Outputs*

* Public presentations at national, European and international conferences:
  + CAL ’07, Dublin, Eire
  + ELI 2007, Atlanta, US
  + Educa Online Berlin, Germany, 2006
  + EDEN Research Workshop 2006, Barcelona, Spain
  + London Knowledge Lab, 2006, lunchtime seminar series, UK (see reference immediately below)
  + ALT‐C 2006, Heriot Watt University, UK
  + Educa Online Berlin, Germany, 2005
  + CAL ’05 Bristol University, UK
* Warburton, S. (2006). *The rise of disruptive technologies: a story of blogging and distance learners.* Paper available from the CDE.
* Warburton, S. (2007). *Disruptive technologies: social software, emergent learning spaces and the ethics of web 2.0.* PowerPoint presentation summarizing results, released under a Creative Commons licence and freely available from the CDE.
* Included in: Hatzipanagos, S. and Warburton, S. (Eds.) (2009). *Handbook of Research on Social Software*, IGI Publishing, Hershey, USA.

**CoMo: Supporting collaborative groupwork using mobile phones in distance education**

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London WC1N 3QS

Yishay Mor, London Knowledge Lab; Kim Whittlestone, Royal Veterinary College, Royal College Street, London NW1 0TU

Keywords: collaboration, group work, mobile phones, veterinary science

Date of Final Report: June 2008

**Abstract**

The value and role of the now almost ubiquitous mobile phone in education is still under debate. The CoMo project team set out, in collaboration with colleagues from the Royal Veterinary College, London, to evaluate how phones with still and video cameras can be used to support group work in veterinary medicine at a distance. Six exercises using phones were designed and two selected for complete evaluation. These were tested by clinical veterinary students and further modified from student feedback. Although there were some concerns – in particular, tutors were concerned about confidentiality and inappropriate use of the phones, and students about unfamiliarity with the technology – most students found the exercises very valuable. The ability to take “snapshots” of clinical cases over time was particularly appreciated.

**Research Summary**

The CoMo project set out to explore how the almost ubiquitous and highly technically advanced mobile phone could be used to support collaborative group work among students of clinical veterinary medicine. After a contextual study of the learning environment, six learning activities were identified as being suitable for mobile phone based support and detailed collaborative exercises involving phones designed for two of these – *Hospital Rotations* and *Cows in Spring* – were designed in collaboration with the tutors involved. These were tested by student groups and student feedback was incorporated into adaptations of the exercise design in an iterative process.

Most of the students found the mobile phone based exercises to be valuable and that they had aided their learning. In particular, they valued the opportunity that the phones gave them to record narrative case histories over time. They were also able to use the phone exercises to reflect constructively on their own practice. Some concerns remained; tutors were concerned that students, particularly inexperienced ones, would spend too much time on the exercises, and students were concerned about their own unfamiliarity with the technology. The fact that the students would, quite naturally, want to use the phones for social as well as scientific purposes was seen as, on balance, a virtue rather than a limitation, as veterinary medicine is a very academically demanding course and the tutors recognised that their students also needed opportunities to relax.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

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* Gregson, J. and Jordaan, D. (2006) Designing an M-Learning Project for Postgraduate Distance Learning Students in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Countries. *Proceedings of mLearn*, Banff, Canada.
* Koole, M. (2006) Mobile Devices in Distance Education; Compare, Consider & Collaborate. *Proceedings of mLearn,* Banff, Canada.
* Mor, Y. and Winters, N. (2007). Design approaches in technology-enhanced learning. *Interactive Learning Environments,* 15(1), 61 - 75

*Outputs*

* Presentations:
  + Seminar at London Knowledge Lab., November 2009
  + Presentation at A Language of Patterns for Mathematical Learning, Technicon, Haifa, April 2008
  + Demonstration at London Knowledge Lab open evening, June 2009
  + Panel discussion at eLearning Africa 2008, “Designing Sustainable Technologies for Africa: Engaging with Local Perspectives”
  + Case study at design workshop for the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore, August 2008
* Papers:
  + Wali, E., Winters, N. and Oliver, M. (2008). Mobile Learning Across Contexts: Methodological Considerations. In: *Proceedings of Mobile Learning 2008*, pp. 98-105. Algarve, Portugal.
  + Whittlestone, K,. Bullock, L., Pirkelbauer, B. and May, S. The Significant Factors affecting Engagement of Veterinary Students with Mobile Learning, In: *Proceedings of Mobile Learning 2008*, pp. 135-139. Algarve, Portugal.
* Several of the presentations are available from SlideShare at <http://www.slideshare.net/yish/>

**Mobile Phones for Development (Mob4Dev): Supporting Veterinary Training of Distance Learners in Tanzania**

Niall Winters, London Knowledge Lab, 23-29 Emerald St, London WC1N 3QS

Nick Short and Andrew Hagner, Royal Veterinary College, Royal College Street, London NW1 0TU

Keywords: mobile learning, social software, veterinary science, development

Date of Final Report: March 2010

**Abstract**

The Mobv4Dev project was designed to investigate how both Internet-enabled mobile phones and social media could be used to support the training of veterinary students in the field in Africa. A short distance-learning exercise was designed and used with students from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), London, UK working with veterinarians and their assistants in Zanzibar. The RVC students worked in groups to collect data on the cattle disease East Coast Fever. The students used the phones to enter physical data using Google’s Open Data Kit (ODK), and Twitter (via the twidroid application) to communicate with each other and the course team. Student experience was assessed through structured interviews and fieldwork observation. In general, they found that the experience aided their learning, with Twitter used mainly to aid the project logistics. Future work will investigate the provision of specific data analysis tools for fieldwork using a similar phone.

**Research Summary**

Mobile phones are becoming ubiquitous, even in many Southern countries; there are now over 5 billion such devices in use worldwide. The proportion of Internet-enabled “smart” phones is high and growing, and there is much interest in the value of these phones in education. In the CoMo project, Niall Winters and co-workers explored the use of mobile phones to support practical groupwork in veterinary education in the UK. The Mobv4Dev project has taken this further forward in exploring how phones can be used to support education in the more hostile environment of poor farming communities in Zanzibar. Advanced undergraduate students from the RVC have the opportunity to take part in group fieldwork, and in 2009 this involved investigating the epidemiology of East Coast Fever, a devastating cattle disease, in Zanzibar. Winters designed an activity to explore how smart phones and social software could be used to support the students in this activity.

Few of the students involved self-identified themselves as “digital natives” before the exercise began; not many used the Internet regularly on their personal phones, and none had Twitter accounts. In the field, they worked in teams, some examining the animals physically and others entering data into the phones using Google’s ODK. The students identified both strengths and weaknesses of this strategy, finding them easy to use although not as flexible as pen and paper for, for example, recording sketches and images. Future versions of the ODK are expected to address this problem. Twitter was used mainly to facilitate project planning and for the students to communicate with their supervisors back in London, and the phones were also used for applications that the students were more familiar with including Outlook and Facebook. In his conclusions, Winters stressed the importance of remembering the high proportion of students who still do not think of themselves as expert users of technology in designing distance learning exercises that depend on it.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Laurillard, D. (2002) *Rethinking university teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies* (2nd ed.). Routledge, London, UK
* Laurillard, D. (2009) The pedagogical challenges to collaborative technologies, *International Journal of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning,* 4**(1)**, 5-20
* Winters, N. (2009) *DeMoEx:* *A participatory design framework for mobile learning experience.* LKL Technical Report. London Knowledge Lab., London, UK

*Outputs*

* The project has been presented at the following conferences:
  + Africa Gathering 2009, Nairobi, Kenya, December 2009
  + eLearning Africa 2010, Lusaka, Zambia, May 2010
  + Centre for African Studies 2010 Conference, *ICT: Africa's Revoluntary Tools for the 21st Century?* University of Edinburgh, UK, May 2010
  + CDE Fellows’ Conference 2010, *Research in Distance Education: Impact on practice.* University ofLondon, UK, October 2010

The full formal project report has been made available through the CDE. Please see: <http://cdelondon.wordpress.com/2010/07/28/tra5nwinters/>

**SUPPORTING TEACHING**

**AND LEARNING**

**Enhancing Student and Tutor Support in Distance Learning in the External System**

Beverley Brown, Assistant Director, External Laws Programme, Stewart House, 32 Russell Square

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David Baume, Principal Consultant, Rosie Gosling, LSE, Mary Luckham, External Laws Programme; Catherine MacMillan, Queen Mary, University of London

Keywords: accreditation, international students, law, teacher support

Date of Final Report: March 2006

**Abstract**

The University of London’s External Laws distance learning programme offers undergraduate and postgraduate law courses to students in many countries, with the support of local tutors. This project examined ways of supporting and accrediting the locally-based tutors on this programme. Extensive interviews with both students and tutors in several locations were carried out in order to establish how a model of tutor accreditation might work in practice. The responses from both London-based and overseas staff were very positive about accreditation. Detailed responses were published in two reports and fed into a model of accreditation developed by educationalist David Baume that could be followed by other colleges. A detailed teachers’ guide was published with funding from a second incomplete project,

**Summary of Research Findings**

Extensive interviews were carried out with London-based individuals involved in teaching the Laws programme and with senior staff teaching the course in six institutions in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. This was complemented by teacher observation and interviews with students at those institutions. Issues raised in these interviews and through the observation were summarised by David Baume in two reports, one summarising the consultations within the overseas institutions, and the other making recommendations for the development of an accreditation programme.

The opinions of teachers and students on the Laws programme summarised in the reports were very positive about the idea of formal accreditation for tutors, describing a number of benefits including improved consistency in the quality of teaching and an enhancement in the reputation of the Laws Programme as a whole. The suggested accreditation was one that was evidence-based, with teachers presenting a portfolio including critical reflection on their work, and would be structured around five aspects of work: planning, teaching, giving feedback, reviewing teaching and developing as a teacher. A further section laid out recommendations for developing and strengthening the relationship between the University and the external colleges while maintaining independence and differences in local context. The recommendations included the development of short practice guides and manuals for new staff; the production of such a guide was funded through a second Teaching and Research Award.

The resulting document, authored by Beverley Brown and David Baume, is a practical guide that is applicable to teachers on the London External Laws programme in any country and context and teaching at undergraduate or postgraduate level. It introduces the concept of student-centred learning and gives examples of good practice, dividing the discipline of teaching into the five aspects listed above. The final section of the guide presents some very useful guidance for institutions involved in teaching the programme, explaining the separate roles of the University of London, the institutions offering courses and the individual teachers in delivering the Laws programme.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

Baume, D. and Baume, C. (1996). A national scheme to develop and accredit university teachers. *International Journal for Academic Development* **1(2):** 51-58.

Baume, D. (2003). Far too successful? in *Case Studies in Staff and Educational Development*. H. Edwards and D. Baume. London, Kogan Page. 153-161

*Outputs*

* Two published reports, both authored by David Baume, educational consultant and project member:
* *Accrediting External Laws Tutors ‐ Report on Consultations in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore* (2005)
* *Accrediting External Laws Teachers – Summary Report and Recommendations* (2006)
* *Teachers’ Guide* for new teachers on the Laws programme (2006) by David Baume and Beverley Brown

Both reports and the Teachers’ Guide are available from the Centre for Distance Education free of charge.

**Courses for All? Improving Access to Online Learning**

Will Gibson, Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL

Sue Cranmer & Hugh Starkey, Institute of Education

Keywords: disability, e-learning, inclusive education, student support

Final Report: July 2008

**Abstract**

It is now a legal requirement to make all education as accessible as possible to people with disabilities. Accessibility can present a particular challenge to providers of distance education. This project set out to examine methods for making such courses more accessible, and to distinguish and promote best practice in the area. This was carried out through an extensive review of the literature and a critical analysis of existing guidelines; two focused case studies; and the formation of a special interest group of academics from within the University of London who were interested in discussing these issues. One case study focused on the use of a screen reader by blind and partially sighted students and the other on an evaluation of the accessibility of the course material for a MA in Citizenship.

**Research Summary**

When the Disability Discrimination Act of 2001 was extended to include education in 2005 this placed a legal liability on all education providers to make their courses accessible to those with disabilities wherever possible. This can be particularly difficult for providers of distance education and e-learning, although the potential for these modes of study to overcome some disabilities has also been noted. An extensive review of the literature around the accessibility of online learning was carried out, covering a range of issues including differences in institutional approaches and the development of best practice in course material development. Existing materials and guidelines, such as those produced by the educational advisory service TechDis[[2]](#footnote-1) were analysed and found to be clear and detailed. The involvement of a blind student in one of the case studies, in evaluating a Java-based screen reader and suggesting modifications, led to some useful recommendations.

In general, the researchers found that there is plenty of clear, useful advice available for educators who wish to make their courses more accessible. They found, however, that there is still a problem with compliance. Academics often feel unconfident in this area and lack the time to develop their skills. Although there was a great deal of general interest in the focus group, in practice meetings were quite poorly attended.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

Burgstahler, S., Corrigan, B. and McCarter, J. (2004). Making Distance Learning Courses Accessible to Students and Instructors with Disabilities: a Case Study. *Internet and Higher Education* **7**: 233-246.

Foley, A.R. (2003). 'Distance, Disability and the Commodification of Education: Web accessibility and the construction of knowledge'. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* **6**: 27-39.

Seale, J. (2006). *E-Learning and Disability in Higher Education*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK.

*Outputs*

* Project blog: <http://coursesforall.wordpress.com/>
* Review of the literature on access to online learning (unpublished): freely available from <http://coursesforall.wordpress.com/literature-review/>
* Presentations:
  + CDE Fellows Conference, Institute of Education, June 2007
  + PREEL (From Pedagogic Research to Embedded Learning): Staff Development session, Institute of Education, June 2007
  + London Knowledge Lab Research Seminar, Institute of Education July 2007
  + Special Interest Group Courses for All? Presentation of findings, Institute of Education, January 2008

**Developing an Educational Model for Delivery and Support of Postgraduate Distance Learning in Southern Africa that incorporates M-learning**

Jon Gregson, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Thornhaugh St., London WC1H 0XG

Keywords: Africa, development studies, mobile phones, student support

Date of Final Report: December 2007

**Abstract**

E-learning that is to be delivered in countries with very limited infrastructure needs to make use of technologies that are widely available in those countries. One technology that is becoming widespread even in very poor countries is the mobile phone. In this project, student exercises involving mobile phones were developed and tested with a small sample of students in Southern African countries taking postgraduate modules in development studies from SOAS. These students, who were each provided with a multimedia phone, were very enthusiastic about the activities involved and provided useful feedback on the logistics, practicality and pedagogy of the activities that could be used in subsequent mobile phone based teaching.

**Research Summary**

The Centre for Development, Environment and Policy (CeDEP) at SOAS offers postgraduate courses in topics related to international development to students in over a hundred countries, some of which have limited technological infrastructure. With the use of mobile phones rising dramatically in many developing countries, this project set out to evaluate mobile phone based learning exercises with students in southern Africa. Two students from each of Malawi and Tanzania, studying modules in “‘Rural Development’ and ‘ICT for Development’ were given Nokia N70 multimedia phones – then state-of-the-art – and asked to work through extensive activities using them. These involved studying audio and video files and using the phones to take part in quizzes. The four participating students reflected on their use of the mobile technology and made suggestions; a further twenty students were then enrolled in a second-stage project. All students provided feedback that will be useful for the development of subsequent mobile phone based activities.

The development of these course exercises, now tested with 24 students, proved that it was possible to design multi-media learning activities that were appropriate to a Southern African context. Using their phones, students in a resource poor environment were able to access a rich range of learning resources, administrative tools and social software. Both the pedagogical insights from the project and the technical skills learned are informing the development of further mobile phone-based resources for courses run within CeDEP and should prove useful elsewhere.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

Brown, TH. (2004). The role of m-learning in the future of e-learning in Africa. In*: Distance Education and Technology: Issues and Practice*, **473,** 197-216, Open University of Hong Kong Press.

Keegan, D. (2003). *The future of learning: From eLearning to mLearning*. Hagen: Fernstudienforchung, Germany. E-published version available: <http://learning.ericsson.net/mlearning2/project_one/book.html>

*Outputs*

* Presentations at the following conferences:
* The Centre for Distance Education Fellows Conference, University of London, UK, 21 June 2006.
* mLearn 2006, Canada, 22‐25 October 2006
* WLE M‐Learning Symposium, Institute of Education, 9 February 2007
* ICT for Development Seminar, CDE & ICT4D, al the London Knowledge Lab, 10 October 2006.
* eLearning Africa, Nairobi, 28‐30 May 2007
* The Centre for Distance Education Fellows Conference University of London, UK, 2007.
* Handheld Learning Conference, London, 10‐12 October 2007
* mLearn 2007, Melbourne, 16‐19 October
* CT4D Workshop on Mobile Learning, Royal Holloway, 8 December 2007
* Learning Technology Presentation at LSHTM, 2007
* Gregson, J. (2008). *Exploring the Challenges and Opportunities of M‐Learning within an International Distance Education Programme*. Report available from the CDE and also published as a book chapter by Athabasca University, Canada.

**Improving Student Retention in Postgraduate Distance Education at the University of London**

Sarah Jones, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG

Christine Berry, University of Auckland; Paul Smith, consultant

Keywords: financial studies, postgraduate teaching, retention, student support

Date of Final Report: December 2008

**Abstract**

Student retention can be a particular problem in distance education. This project sought to evaluate student drop-out in one particular discipline, postgraduate finance and management at SOAS, to explore best practice and to develop recommendations for improving retention. Its findings confirmed earlier studies that highlighted the importance of the quantity and quality of interactions between students and their tutors, and the extent to which the students felt supported and cared for by their tutors and institution, in promoting student retention. A set of eighteen guidelines for improving retention, covering the whole life-cycle of a student on a course and emphasizing the need for human contact, were developed and piloted with Masters’ students of finance and management at SOAS.

**Research Summary**

Many students who start courses fail to finish them. This problem of student retention can be particularly acute in distance education, where students often feel isolated from their tutors and their peers. This project focused on postgraduate students in the Centre for Financial and Management Studies (CeFiMS) at SOAS, where the researchers established that only 25% of students who started courses in 2005 finished the programme within three years. Student feedback indicated that these students – typically mature, highly motivated graduates – felt a sense of isolation and a need for greater support by the college.

Further evaluation of the demographics, experience and outcomes of this group of students established a need for active follow-up that would identify students at most risk of failing to progress and offer them further support as needed. A set of eighteen guidelines for supporting students and promoting retention were developed that were independent of discipline and could be applied in many circumstances. These covered the whole student cycle, starting with recommendations for taster courses and pre-enrolment advice. Further recommendations included asking alumni societies to provide mentors and offering advice to students’ employers, families and friends. These guidelines are being piloted on MSc courses within CeFiMS and have been made more widely available.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References*

* Black, J. and Metzger, T. (2007). *Innovative Educators: Increasing Enrolment and Retention via Technology*
* Creed, C., Allsop, T., Mills, R. and Morpeth, R. (2005). *The art of the possible: issues of learner support in open and distance learning in low income countries*. Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, Canada.
* Simpson, O. (2003). *Student Retention in Online, Open and Distance Learning* Routledge Ltd., Abingdon, UK
* Simpson, O. 2006. ‘Predicting student success in open and distance learning’ *Open Learning*, **21(2),** 125–138

*Outputs*

* Presentations of the project results were given in the following forums:
  + Poster at Innovative Educators academic conference, November 2008
  + Seminar at CDE Fellows’ Conference “Research in Distance Education:
  + from present findings to future agendas”, February 2009
  + Seminar at Annual Review of Distance Learning, CeFiMS, SOAS, February 2009
  + Seminar at ASEM conference, Beijing, November 2008
* The eighteen guidelines for improving student retention developed during the course of this project are available from Sarah Jones [sj29@soas.ac.uk](mailto:sj29@soas.ac.uk) or from the CDE.

**Teachers as media producers in Virtual Classrooms**

Tim Neumann, London Knowledge Lab, 23-29 Emerald Street London WC1N 3QS

Keywords: conferencing, e-learning, multimedia, teacher support

Date of Final Report: March 2007

**Abstract**

An online system combining audio and video web conferencing may be termed a Virtual Classroom when it is used in an educational setting; the software very often includes tools for manipulating text and images. Three different pieces of web conferencing software were evaluated for use in the Virtual Classroom context, with an emphasis on the role of the teacher. Teaching and learning in Virtual Classrooms was observed in six different international application scenarios, teachers were interviewed and one learner survey carried out. These identified a gap between pedagogic theory and teacher experience and pedagogic models were developed to begin to fill this gap.

**Summary of Research Findings**

Although the use of web conferencing tools in education is growing fast, there is relatively little literature on the pedagogy of this approach. Information in the literature has tended to be confined to practical tips for use in particular cases. This project sought to contextualise the way that teachers interact with students in Virtual Classrooms by exploring a variety of approaches.

In most cases, even relatively inexperienced teachers found that it was quite easy to set up and learn to use the full range of web conferencing software involved, including image manipulation and text chat. However, they were almost universally less confident with the use of the tools in a pedagogical context. Teachers found it difficult to combine manipulating the technology with teaching in real time and were helped by the presence of moderators or facilitators who could control the software.

Most of the students and teachers found their experience of Virtual Classrooms a generally positive one. This was particularly the case with a session run in Nigeria, where the participants highlighted it as an educational opportunity that had not been available to them before. However, one problem identified was that the learners identified themselves principally as passive participants, “spectators” rather than “learners”, even in cases where they had been expected to work on tasks during the session. This highlighted a mismatch between the expected and perceived levels of learner involvement in sessions taught in Virtual Classrooms.

In general, more benefits than drawbacks were found to the use of Virtual Classrooms in these few examples, and their further use and development could be recommended both in and beyond the Bloomsbury colleges and maybe, particularly, in regions of the world that are generally poor in educational resources. However, the administrative work involved in selecting, resourcing, installing and operating such a system is significant. Collaborations between institutions are recommended to overcome some of these issues.

**Outputs and References**

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Anderson T. D. and Garrison, D. R. (1995). Transactional issues in distance education: The impact of design in audio teleconferencing. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, **9 (2)** 27‐45.

Brandon, B. (2005). 834 Tips for Successful Online Instruction. The eLearning Guild.

Available from URL: <http://www.elearningguild.com/content.cfm?selection=doc.541>

Rosell‐Aguilar, Fernando (2005). Task design for audiographic conferencing: promoting beginner oral interaction in distance language learning. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, **18 (5),** 417‐442.

*Project Outcomes*

* An exemplar Virtual Classroom (presented by Diana Laurillard, Institute of Education / London Knowledge Lab, 21 March 2006) may be viewed at <http://www.lkl.ac.uk/ltu/webinar>
* Presentations given during the course of the project:
* Kaleidoscope: 3rd Postgraduate Symposium, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK, 02 June 2006.
* Blended Learning Unit Conference University of Hertfordshire, UK, 15 June 2006.
* The Centre for Distance Education Fellows Conference, University of London, UK, 21 June 2006.
* Doctoral School Summer Conference, Institute of Education, London, UK, 24 June 2006.
* ALT‐C 2006, Heriot‐Watt University, Edinburgh, UK, 05‐07 September 2006.
* ICT for Development Seminar, CDE & ICT4D, al the London Knowledge Lab, 10 October 2006.
* Bloomsbury Colleges Academic Showcase, 14 February 2007

**MoSAIC: Models for Synchronous Audiographic**

**Interactive Conferencing**

Tim Neumann, London Knowledge Lab, 23-29 Emerald St, London WC1N 3QS

Keywords: e-learning, multimedia, pedagogy, synchronous conferencing

Date of Final Report: July 2010

**Abstract**

Synchronous audiographic conferencing (SAC) is the name given to a group of tools that enable people, usually but not always in different locations, to interact together in real time over the Internet using audio and often a range of other tools including video, text chat and shared whiteboards. In the MoSAIC project, Tim Neumann reviewed the use of SAC technology in teaching in the constituent colleges of the University of London. At the start of the project five of 19 colleges used web-based systems with all the features of SAC in some of their teaching. Neumann explored the pedagogical basis for teaching using this technique and proposed models of learning that are particularly suitable for an immersive virtual environment and that can be extended into game-based and simulation-based learning. Students, particularly those studying at a distance, found SAC to be valuable in their learning. A further useful outcome of the project was the formation of a network of expert teachers within the London colleges who can be called on to advise on the adoption and use of SAC.

**Summary of Research Findings**

A previous CDE-funded project led by Tim Neumann, Teachers as media producers in Virtual Classrooms, had concluded that more pedagogic understanding of synchronous audiographic conferencing would be needed for this tool to reach its undoubted potential in facilitating teaching and learning. This project builds on that and some earlier systematic reviews to develop and test learning models that are particularly appropriate for this technology. During the project, SAC was introduced or extended in the University of London External Programme’s Master of Research degree and in various courses in the Institute of Education, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Birkbeck College among others. Lecturers at these colleges in particular became experienced practitioners of teaching via SAC, and some of these formed, with learning technologists, a network of experienced SAC practitioners in London who are willing and able to share their expertise. Participants’ experiences were assessed through surveys, recordings of sessions and a small number of semi-structured interviews.

The research mainly involved lecturers working within a distance-learning context, who value ways of increasing interaction with their students and who are therefore particularly drawn to teaching in this way. Nevertheless, many participants experienced a steep learning curve and optimum methods of training staff need to be clearly thought through. Distance-learning students also found the opportunity of engaging with their tutors in real time to be valuable. The technology was also found to be useful in less formal educational contexts, including for staff development and participation in research conferences.

In May 2010, Tim Neumann and the London Knowledge Lab were awarded the Elluminate 2010 Center of Excellence award for the MoSAIC project. This award included a cash sum to support travel and further dissemination of the project findings.

**Outputs and References**

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* Finkelstein, J. (2006). *Learning in real time: synchronous teaching and learning online.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA, USA
* Neumann, T. & Carrington, A. (2007), 'A mass collaboration approach to e-learning: multiple venue production', *Association for Learning Technology Newsletter.*
* San Diego, J. P., Laurillard, D., Boyle, T., Bradley, C., Ljubojevic, D., Neumann, T. & Pearce, D. (2008). Towards a user-oriented analytical approach to learning design. *ALT-J* **16(1)**, 15-29

*Outputs*

* De Freitas, S. & Neumann, T. (2009a), Pedagogic strategies supporting the use of Synchronous Audiographic Conferencing: A review of the literature. *British Journal of Education Technology* **40(6),** 980-998
* De Freitas, S. & Neumann, T. (2009b), 'The use of 'exploratory learning' for supporting immersive learning in virtual environments. *Computers & Education* **52(2)**, 343-352
* Numerous conference presentations from 2007-2011, details available from the authors on request.
* Project website at <http://projects.lkl.ac.uk/mosaic>
* A copy of the full formal report of this project is available from the CDE. Please contact them for further information.

**The Research Element in Masters’ Degrees in Distance Education: Literature Review and Mapping Survey**

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Fiona Hyland, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Clare Bentall, Department of Lifelong and Continuing Education, Institute of Education

Keywords: masters’ degrees, supervision, dissertations, distance learning

Date of Final Report: June 2010

**Abstract**

The supervision of research projects at Master’s level is an area that has been poorly covered in educational research. In the first stage of this project, Amos Paran and his co-workers reviewed the available literature in this area, with a particular emphasis on courses where students work at a distance. A complete survey of London colleges’ research requirements for Master’s students was carried out and nine course leaders interviewed. The literature survey showed supervision of postgraduate students at a distance is an under-researched area, with only four papers touching on this topic and none focusing on it completely. Nevertheless, the survey and particularly the structured interviews, with questions derived from that survey, led to some important findings. These included the very wide variety of provision for research and expectations of students within Masters’ programmes; the crucial management role of the course team chair; the importance of timing and staging the dissertation process, and the balance between academic support and pastoral care. It was acknowledged that distance-learning students may need particularly high levels of support.

**Summary of Research Findings**

The formal literature review confirmed Paran and his colleagues’ expectations of the lack of research into research project supervision at a distance. Only a few studies of student research projects at Masters’ level were identified, fewer still concerned with research projects undertaken at a distance, and none were concerned with both Masters’ projects and distance learning. Furthermore, most of the studies were small, and, perhaps not surprisingly, education as a discipline was over-represented. However, important points could still be drawn from a relatively small survey; in particular, Paran and his colleagues observed a very large variation in research requirements for Masters’ degrees both between institutions and between disciplines, and noted the importance of the course leader as well as a student’s individual supervisor in maintaining the relationship between the institution and the student.

Results from the literature survey were fed into a questionnaire that was used in semi-structured interviews with nine directors of Masters’ level courses involving distance education within University of London. Eight of these came from colleges within the University’s External System. Course leaders stressed the importance of pastoral care of research students, who often feel isolated; this can be compounded when the students are working alone and/or at a distance from their supervisors. It is helpful if the students can be made to feel part of a community. Timing and staging projects and dissertations to fit in with the rest of a student’s work and what may be a tight course time-table can be difficult. The course leader has a crucial role and more research would be useful to feed into training for both leaders and supervisors.

**Outputs and References**

*Key References[[3]](#footnote-2)*

* Anderson, C., Day, K. & McLaughlin, P. (2006) Mastering the dissertation: Lecturers’ representations of the purposes and processes of Master’s level dissertation supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, **31(2):** 149 – 168.
* Brown, L. (2007) A consideration of the challenges involved in supervising international masters students, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, **31(3)**: 239-248.
* Stacey, E. & Fountain, W. (2001) “Student and supervisor perspectives in a computer mediated research relationship”, G. Kennedy, M. Keppell, C. McNaught & T. Petrovic (Eds.), *Meeting at the Crossroads. Proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference of the Australian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education.* (pp. 519-528). Melbourne, Australia

*Outputs*

* Presentation at CDE Research Conference, *Research in Distance Education: from present findings to future agendas*, February 9th, 2009.
* Presentation, 'The Programme Leader: A Missing Link in Distance Supervision?' IOE Learning and Teaching Conference, April 2011.
* Paran, A., Hyland, F. and Bentall, C. (submitted for publication; please contact A. Paran for more details.) Managing and mediating the research element on Master's courses: The roles of course leaders and supervisors.
* A complete report of the project, including the fully referenced literature review and an analysis of interviews with directors of University of London Masters’ degree courses, is available from the CDE. Please contact them for further information.

**Use of Social Software in a Master’s Degree in Structural Molecular Biology by Distance**

**Learning**

Clare Sansom, Birkbeck, University of London, WC1E 7HX

Christine Slingsby, Birkbeck

Keywords: e-learning, molecular biology, social software, web 2.0

Date of Final Report: July 2009

**Abstract**

The Internet-based MSc course in Structural Molecular Biology run by Birkbeck, University of London, used essentially the same technologies in the eight years following its launch in 1999. This project set out to explore the extent to which a range of Web 2.0 based “social software” tools, including a blog, a wiki, social bookmarking, Instant Messenger, and the “immersive virtual world”, Second Life, would enhance the learning of students on this course. These tools were integrated into the first-year course module Principles of Protein Structure during the academic year 2007-8: students’ opinions of the software were polled at the beginning and end of the year, and more detailed responses sought using a focus group. Most tools were well received, particularly the blog and Instant Messenger, but the results stressed the importance of letting pedagogy drive technology and of choosing tools that can benefit a full cohort of students.

**Research Summary**

Birkbeck was one of the first UK institutions to develop a wholly Internet-based distance learning course at Masters’ level. This course used at the time innovative software including molecular visualization tools and a text-based “multi-user dimension” or MUD for real-time communication with students. This project explored the potential of a range of newer tools, mainly based on Web 2.0, for aiding the learning experience of the disparate students on the M.Sc. programme. In the academic year in which the tools were piloted this included a group of students from developing countries supported through scholarships from the Commonwealth Scholarships Commission.

Most students had at least some experience with the tools used even at the start of the course, and reported that they made full use of them and found that they aided learning. The course blog, which made connections between the course material and recently published research, was widely read although students were reluctant to post or even comment on it. The wiki exercise, applied to the students’ project work but not separately assessed, was less popular. Most students preferred using Instant Messenger software for real-time communication over the slower and older “MUD”, although this preference was reversed in students supported by Commonwealth Scholarships. Those students who were able to try out Second Life – a group that included one former student with Asperger’s syndrome – found it innovative and useful, although this included only one Commonwealth Scholar. Several of the tools are being integrated into the course more generally, with the caveats that software choice must be determined both by appropriate pedagogy and by the resources that are available to all students.

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* Sansom, C. (2009) *Social Software Aids Digital Inclusion: An example from M.Sc. Bioscience.* Making Connections conference, Open University, Milton Keynes, June 2009
* Sansom, C. (2009) *Using Web 2.0 to Facilitate Learning in Molecular Science*. HEA Physical Sciences workshop “Making Web 2.0 Work for You”, Leeds, October 2009
* Sansom. C. (2011) Teaching Science in Second Life. Seminar at the Centre for Distance Education, April 2011.
* Copies of all presentations are available from Clare Sansom, [c.sansom@mail.cryst.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:c.sansom@mail.cryst.bbk.ac.uk), or from the CDE.

Paper:

Sansom, C.E. Remote Use of Web 2.0 Technology by MSc Structural Molecular Biology Students from the Global South. Paper presented at PCF5: full text available from <http://wikieducator.org/images/3/3a/PID_327.pdf>**LASSIE: Libraries and Social Software in Education**

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Gwyneth Price, IoE; Kris Roger, LSE; Ian Snowley, Research Library Services, University of London; Caroline Lloyd, LSHTM

Keywords: libraries, social software, student support, web 2.0

Date of Final Report: February 2008

**Abstract**

The LASSIE project set out to explore whether, and to what extent, social software – or Web 2.0 technologies – could enhance the experience of distance learning students using library services. There is now a great deal of interest in how these widely used technologies can best be incorporated into education. An extensive literature review was produced and five case studies carried out, each looking at a different type or use of social software: reading lists, resource sharing, blogging, podcasts and Facebook. The project blog and a collection of web bookmarks made via del.icio.us are still being maintained; these are already proving valuable in supporting distance learning students as they develop information literacy.

**Research Summary**

Web 2.0 based social software tools are now extremely widespread, particularly among younger age groups. There is now a great deal of interest in their use in education, particularly, perhaps, in distance learning where students can feel isolated from their tutors and peers. The LASSIE project team explored the use of social software to help distance learners make the best use of library resources. Five case studies into the use of different tools were produced, making use of student feedback wherever possible.

The tools that proved most useful were the project blog, which is still being maintained; a podcast, and the social bookmarking site del.icio.us, which is being used to maintain a collection of bookmarks of learning resources. In more general terms, the project team concluded that Web 2.0 based social software could undoubtedly help overcome the challenges they face in developing information literacy without the benefit of regular face-to-face contact with library staff. However, the field is moving exceptionally fast and it is essential for library and lecturing staff to keep closely in touch with developments if they are to make the best use of the tools available.

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*Outputs*

* Many outputs from the LASSIE project have been amalgamated into Jane Secker’s blog at <http://elearning.lse.ac.uk/blogs/socialsoftware/>
* You can also access all the outputs of the LASSIE project in LSE Research Online via Jane Secker's publications list: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/view/person/0000084150.html>

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* Secker, J. and Price, G. (2007) Libraries, Social Software and distance learners: blog it, tag it, share it! *New Review of Information Networking*, **13(1)**, 39.
* Secker, J. (2008) The continuing adventures of LASSIE. *ALISS Quarterly* **3(2)**, 9-12.
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* Secker, J., Price, G. and Roger, K. (2007) Libraries, distance learners and social software: providing social spaces to support learning. Paper at *Towards a Social Science of Web 2.0 Conference*. September 2007, York, UK
* Secker, J. and Price, G. (2008) Virtual Libraries as Virtual Learning Spaces: the experiences of the LASSIE project. Paper at *Networked Learning Conference*, May 2008, Halkidiki, Greece.

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**Wake-up Calls for Learning: an Inclusive Approach to Supporting Students in Distance Education**

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Stylianos Hatzipanagos, King’s College

Keywords: academic writing, first-year students, student support, study skills

Date of Final Report: May 2009

**Abstract**

Distance learning students, like all students, need to learn study skills if they are to take full advantage of the opportunities available, irrespective of their core discipline. One key study skills topic that is important for almost all students is academic writing. In this project, a three-module course on generic writing skills was produced, presented to two consecutive cohorts of students taking a B.Sc. Business Administration programme at Royal Holloway College, University of London, and evaluated using questionnaires. The relatively limited questionnaire responses revealed that the students found the writing skills courses useful and that they would be most valuable if they were delivered towards the beginning of the courses, fully integrated with the discipline specific course materials, and supported by the course tutors. This methodology can be applied very easily to supporting students in other disciplines.

**Research Summary**

Study skills material is often not available to, or not appropriate for, distance learning students, or these students fail to make full use of the available material. Nevertheless, learning appropriate study skills is as important for improving students’ outcomes in distance as it is in face-to-face courses. This project involved the creation of three linked modules for teaching writing skills, covering, respectively, general academic writing, the correct use of references and how to avoid plagiarism. These modules were piloted with two cohorts studying Business Administration at Royal Holloway College. The first cohort took the course at the end of their first year examinations; for the second cohort, the modules were made available throughout the students’ first year.

A questionnaire was used to evaluate the students’ experiences with the study skills modules. Results showed that all students who took the (non-compulsory) course and replied to the questionnaire felt that they had enjoyed using the materials and that their writing skills had improved. In general, students would have preferred to access the materials at the beginning of their first year; however, there was a higher take-up with the first cohort, probably because only these students were specifically alerted to the course. The students also thought they would have benefited more if the study skills material had been more closely integrated with the rest of the course. However, the evaluation of the project is not yet complete as the needs of the majority of students who failed to respond of the questionnaire are yet to be addressed.

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*Outputs*

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* Paper(s) in preparation: please contact Ursula Wingate [ursula.wingate@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:ursula.wingate@kcl.ac.uk) or the CDE for further information.

**EVALUATION**

**AND ASSESSMENT**

**Narrative Studies of Student Experience of E-Learning in Postgraduate Programmes:**

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Norbert Pachler, Jon Pickering, & Jeff Bezemer, Institute of Education (project 1)

Norbert Pachler, Jon Pickering, Jeff Bezemer (Institute of Education); Jill Russell, Open Learning Unit, University College London; Jon Wardle, CEMP, Bournemouth University (project 2)

Keywords: evaluation, narrative, pedagogy, student experience

Dates of Final Reports: Project 1 February 2007; Project 2 February 2008

**Abstract**

Postgraduate students’ experiences of e-learning were investigated using a narrative model. In the first project, students on the mixed-mode Master of Teaching course at the Institute of Education were encouraged to record their experiences of e-learning both through interviews and in individual online commentaries. The students’ narratives were evaluated and placed in four categories: moving between contexts, communicating online, collaborative learning and “socio-dynamics”. Students were observed to become more confident and competent with the e-learning content during the investigation period and were able to take on more responsibility, for example by running online forums. A second project continued the narrative model of evaluation with students on two further postgraduate courses: International Primary Health Care at UCL and Creative Media Practice at Bournemouth University. This method should have wider applicability in the developing pedagogy of e-learning and in course design.

**Research Summary**

The Master of Teaching programme at the Institute of Education is a mixed-mode course, combining face-to-face and e-learning components. The use of a narrative model to study students’ perception of e-learning was tested using one cohort of students on this course, who were asked to recount their experiences online individually and in groups, and to take part in focus group interviews. A DVD record of the focus groups was kept for staff development. Students’ experiences, as recorded in the various narratives, were divided into the categories of moving between contexts, communicating online, collaborative learning and “socio-dynamics” (or the development of relationships between geographically dispersed students). Although there was much variation, the students’ experiences were generally positive and their confidence grew throughout the course, with some being able to take on a teacher’s role.

In a follow-on project, the narrative method of assessing students’ experience was tested further using cohorts of students on two further postgraduate courses at different institutions: International Primary Health Care at University College London and Creative Media Practice at Bournemouth University. This allowed the investigators to evaluate a further range of methods for following students’ experience during the courses; widening the focus beyond students of education allows further development of the pedagogy of e-learning and practical suggestions for course design.

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  + Paper. ‘Using narrative methods to investigate e‐learner experiences: why we need an embedded approach to evaluation’ based on a presentation at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Warwick, September 2006.
  + Presentation at MTeach Awayday 26 June 2006: ‘CDE project: A study of learners’ experiences in the mixed‐mode
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* Further presentations given internally and at conferences organized by e.g. the Higher Education Academy.

**Identifying Effective Formative Assessment Practices and Feedback Processes: Lecturer and Student Experiences**

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Paul Black, KCL; Ana Lucena, KCL; Bob McCormick, Open University; Steven Warburton, KCL (both projects)

Keywords: cooperation, feedback, formative assessment, student experience

Dates of Final Reports: August 2008 (Project 1); June 2009 (Project 2)

**Abstract**

Formative assessment is designed to support students’ learning, rather than contributing to a final assessment. In the first of these two linked projects, Hatzipanagos and co-workers surveyed three institutions’ practice, comparing methods of formative assessment in distance learning and identifying techniques that they considered would enhance student learning. Activities that encourage cooperation between students, including peer and self assessment, were most often considered to contribute best to students’ development. The second project evaluated the perceptions of students from the same three institutions of formative assessment using structured interviews. The students’ replies suggested that the assessment in many distance learning courses was too tightly focused on exams, which provide insufficient feedback, and that social software and other computer-based communication tools can facilitate formative assessment and learning.

**Research Summary**

The aim of formative assessment is to provide students with feedback on their marked work that will enable them to engage with their studies and improve their performance. These two linked projects set out to explore, firstly, lecturers’ experiences and secondly, students’ experiences of formative assessment in distance education, and to recommend good practice. The first project involved conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers across several disciplines in three disparate institutions involved in distance education: King’s College London, the Open University and London University’s External System and building up a set of case studies. There was agreement that dialogue between students and tutors leading to “empowering” of the students is particularly important in formative assessment. Strategies for computer-based formative assessment that maintain this dialogue and the active participation of students are to be preferred, although this can be difficult in some instances such as end-of-year assessments. Peer assessment, which was used most widely by the Open University, was seen as particularly valuable.

The second project explored the experience with formative assessment of distance learning students at the same three institutions. Students found formative assessment extremely valuable and generally learned less from summative assessments such as exams. The use of communication tools that encourage dialogue between student and tutor, including social software, for assessment can facilitate dialogue and understanding and it would be useful to explore these tools further.

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* Hatzipanagos, S. and Warburton, S. (2009). Feedback as Dialogue: Exploring the Links between Formative Assessment and Social Software in Distance Learning. *Learning, Media and Technology*, **34(1)**, 45 – 59.

Presentations

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* Hatzipanagos, S. (2010) Feedback as dialogue and learning technologies: can e-assessment be formative? Seminar at the Centre for Distance Education, April 2010

Other

* This work has led to the award of a book contract to S. Hatzipanagos & S. Warburton (editors) on *Social Software and Developing Community Ontologies*, to be published by IGI Global.
* Further reports of conference proceedings and a PowerPoint presentation are available from Stylianos Hatzipanagos [s.hatzipanagos@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:s.hatzipanagos@kcl.ac.uk)

**Ipsative Assessment and Motivation of Distance Learners**

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Keywords: ipsative feedback, formative assessment, student motivation

Date of Final Report: July 2010

**Abstract**

Ipsative assessment is defined as assessment that is based on a student’s past performance, rather than specific criteria. Gwyneth Hughes and her co-workers conducted a literature survey of the use of ipsative assessment in distance learning and surveyed the extent to which this type of assessment is both used and valued on a distance learning Masters’ degree in Applied Education Leadership and Management. This was a small study involving eleven volunteer students in one cohort. Feedback from tutors was analysed on two scales: ipsative versus criterion-based, and task-specific versus generic. The authors found that ipsative feedback was used fairly rarely, even though both students and tutors found it valuable, and that tutors were fairly sceptical about its use in practice, particularly for grading. A shift in balance towards ipsative feedback should help students, with criterion-based feedback thought to be most useful when it is very specific to a particular task.

**Summary of Research Findings**

Formative assessment, which guides students’ progress but is not used for grading, is regarded as particularly important in the context of distance learning. Ipsative feedback, which refers to students’ past performance, is considered to be valuable to students but is less commonly used than feedback tied to specific grading, and its use is almost entirely confined to formative assessment. In this project, Hughes and her co-workers used a literature review and case study to explore the value and use of ipsative feedback by a cohort of masters’ level students and their tutors on a distance learning course in education.

Student questionnaires revealed that most students found written comments on their individual progress (ipsative feedback) particularly helpful. Opinions of ipsative grading, with grades dependent on progress rather than formal criteria, were understandably very much more mixed, with some students assessing this as in some way “cheating”. An anaysis of written feedback received by these students found criterion-based feedback to be used very much more widely than ipsative feedback. The study concluded that a more balanced approach to feedback that related more to individual students’ progress, particularly on generic rather than task-based criteria, would help student motivation and self-assessment. It may, however, be difficult for tutors to move very far down this route without relying more on ipsative grading, which students as well as tutors would find problematic unless it is introduced very carefully.

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* A complete report, “Use of ipsative assessment in distance learning”, including the fully referenced literature review and an analysis of interviews with directors of University of London Masters’ degree courses, is available from the CDE at <http://cdelondon.wordpress.com/2010/07/28/use-of-ipsative-assessment-in-distance-learning/>

**The Place of Distance Education within the Student ‘Life-World’: a Study of International Distance Learners**

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Keywords: distance education, international students, social context, student experience

Date of Final Report: October 2008

**Abstract**

Distance learning students of UK institutions who reside outside the UK often face particular challenges: they can feel isolated from their host institutions and sometimes face difficulties with language and culture. In this project, the experiences of sixty overseas students taking a variety of courses offered by the University of London External System were investigated through extensive interviews. Some of the tutors on these courses were also interviewed. The interviews synthesized into a long formal report and into a series of recommendations for the External System for dealing with students based outside the UK and from different social and cultural contexts.

**Research Summary**

This project set out to evaluate, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, the experiences of students from different backgrounds who were based outside the UK and studying, at a distance, courses provided by the University of London External System. These interviews were designed to evaluate how distance learning fitted into these students’ very disparate contexts or “life-worlds”. Issues covered included students’ motivation for choosing to study and selecting courses, how they engaged with the course material and tutors on a day-to-day basis, and the extent to which they felt their study to be constrained by, for example, work and family commitments and technical limitations.

The interviews showed that, regardless of student background and course choice, most students thought that the education they were receiving at a distance was of good quality. However, they did reveal a range of problems experienced by the students. Issues that raised particular cause for concern included feelings of isolation and difficulties in communication with the institutions. The interviews also revealed that there were serious structural inequalities between students and that, contrary to hope or even expectation, the students’ experience of distance learning served to reinforce rather than to reduce these.

The project findings were summarised in a long, formal report that includes a series of recommendations to institutions within the External System for changes that could help students based outside the UK overcome these difficulties and, possibly, begin to reduce structural inequalities between students from different backgrounds.

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* Short report summarized from the full report for the London School of Economics, covering courses delivered by that institution. Further short reports may be summarized for other institutions on request; contact Neil Selwyn for further details.
* Paper(s) in preparation: please contact Neil Selwyn or the CDE for further information.

**Designing Online Tasks for Effective Discussions**

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Will Gibson (Institute of Education); Cristina Ros i Solé (UCL, SOAS); Joseph Hopkins (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain)

Keywords: asynchronous discussion, e-learning, student experience, task design

Date of Final Report: January 2008

**Abstract**

Asynchronous computer-based discussion involves sending one-to-many messages or emails to a central conferencing system or bulletin board. Although it is commonly used as a tool for tutorials and discussion groups in distance education, there has been relatively little research into its practice. This project involved a detailed review of the literature covering the use of asynchronous discussion in interactions between tutors and students in all educational settings. The resulting review by consultant Joseph Hopkins, which included a set of recommendations to tutors to make their asynchronous communication with students more effective, has been published in the journal *Open Learning*.

**Research Summary**

Software for both synchronous (“real-time”) and asynchronous computer-based discussion is readily available, and both methods are widely used for communication between students and tutors in distance education. Initial research by the project team into the use of asynchronous communication by lecturers noted a lack of deep knowledge of how they can best use this technique to encourage effective discussion between students and foster higher-order learning.

Hopkins and co-authors have produced a thorough, extensive and widely referenced review of the literature and pedagogy of this topic. They discussed the effect that the lecturer’s teaching strategies; the sense of “social presence” established within the conferencing system; and the task type can have on ensuring effective learning. They present a series of recommendations for tutors designing tasks, in order to make their interactions with students using asynchronous conferencing more effective. Finally, they note a need for further investigations, particularly into the role of the learner in maximising the quality of the learning experience, and they call for future research in this area.

This research fed into a later project, Computer-mediated Tasks and Tutor Inputs (CITTI), which explored the extent to which student interaction through asynchronous computer-mediated discussions led to higher order critical inquiry and the social construction of knowledge. Outputs from this project are also included below.

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*Outputs*

Presentations

*From the CITTI Project:*

* Distance learning and human rights education: a contribution to development? presented at the Fifth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning, London, UK, July 2008
* Learning For Social Justice Online: How Can Students Develop Intercultural Skills And Construct Knowledge Together? presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) (Theme: ‘From Teaching to Learning?’), Goteborg, Sweden, September 2008

Papers

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These are not open access journals. Those who are interested in reading these papers but have no access to the journals are advised to contact Hugh Starkey [h.starkey@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:h.starkey@ioe.ac.uk) or the CDE directly.

**Peer Observation of Teaching in the Online Environment: an Action Research Approach**

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**Abstract**

Peer observation is the process of one teacher observing another in the classroom and providing feedback. This project sought to explore methods of conducting peer observation in the context of online teaching. Two online focus groups were set up, involving 29 teachers from a range of higher education institutions, to discuss previous experience of peer observation and potential opportunities for novel approaches within an online learning environment. One group involved teachers from a single course at UCL, the online MSc in International Primary Health Care; the other included teachers in different disciplines, including that MSc. Following a thematic analysis of data generated, a novel approach to peer observation of teaching was implemented within the MSc in International Primary Health Care, peer-to-peer reflection on pedagogical practice (PROPP).These groups took part in practical peer assessment exercises and discussions of the outcomes and included discussion of good practice in online teaching more generally. This was incorporated as part of regular teaching practice within the MSc and resulted in several improvements to course design as well as opportunities for teachers to reflect on teaching experiences within a learning set. Most participants found the peer observation very constructive, and peer observation – as well as more general improvements in course design – has now been included in the MSc in International Primary Health Care.

**Research Summary**

Peer observation, or the practice of teachers observing each other in the classroom and providing constructive feedback on their work, has been in use in education for many years, but it is less easy to see how it can be applied in an online context. This action research project aimed to build a network of teachers interested in applying the peer observation approach to e-learning and to explore how the technique could be best employed within an online community. Two focus groups were set up involving a total of twenty-nine enthusiastic participants from numerous disciplinary backgrounds, including several tutors of the online MSc in International Primary Health Care at UCL.. Building on the themes which emerged from the focus group discussions it became clear that a more creative approach to peer observation could be employed than is often used in teaching institutions, building on individual reflection around specific teaching experiences and peer group discussion. In the online context, peer observation does not have to take place in real time or involve one “observer” and one “observed” and different methods may be more appropriate.

“Peer-to-peer Reflection on Pedagogical Practice” (PROPP) meetings were established among tutors of the MSc in International Primary Health Care. In these, an individual tutor presents a real example of their teaching (e.g. a segment of an online virtual seminar or an example of feedback prepared for a student) and uses this to prompt discussion of a pedagogical issue such as teaching critical writing, assessment or presenting feedback in the online context. This has allowed tutors to reflect critically on their teaching practice in a supportive, collaborative environment, which has led to improvements in course design being implemented across the MSc course. The value of this approach for quality assurance has been noted.

**Outputs and References**

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* Swinglehurst, D., Russell, J. and Greenhalgh, T. (2006). *Peer observation of teaching in the online environment… an Action Research Approach.* Presentation at the CDE Fellows’ Conference, June 2006. PowerPoint presentation available from the CDE.
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* A fuller report of this project is available by email request to Dr Deborah Swinglehurst, [d.swinglehurst@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:d.swinglehurst@qmul.ac.uk)

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1. All presented by D. Laurillard [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. <http://www.techdis.ac.uk/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. These are only a few of the references highlighted in the review. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. These are only a few of the references highlighted in the review. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)