

# Symposium – So what REALLY happens in networked learning?

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## Introduction

This symposium is presented by representatives of both tutors and students who have participated in a set of programmes in Clinical Education at one UK University. The programmes are now in their ninth year of presentation, during which time they have been the subject of action research by both tutors and students. The programmes are delivered by means of what we describe as supported online learning; but the characteristics of this approach closely match the characteristics used to describe networked learning – “learning and teaching carried out largely via the internet/web which emphasises collaborative and cooperative learning, through dialogue and group work together with interaction with online materials, and collaborative knowledge production.” (NLC 2007). The close parallel between this definition of networked learning and Edge Hill’s supported online learning can be seen within the first paper of the symposium – which sets the programme context for the research papers which follow.

Indeed the first paper takes on board one of Salmon’s criticisms of research in e-learning – that contextual factors are often neglected. (Salmon 2002). The paper examines both the pedagogic principles and the initial design considerations underlying the Clinical Education programmes, before going on to summarise research on the programmes which was carried out in 2000-03 and 2005-07. The challenge of designing appropriate materials to support different forms of interactivity, as well as different types of learners, is one that the author has addressed elsewhere. (Schofield, Sackville & Davey 2006), and the concept of alignment which was used in that paper has been adapted to examine the importance of aligning the processes of design and delivery with evaluative research into the programmes. A distinctive feature of this symposium is the drawing together of research which has been carried out over the last eight years with contemporary, ongoing research into aspects of the same programmes.

The second paper has been researched, written and presented by a group of participants on one of the MA modules which focussed on the use (actual and potential) of e-learning within the Health Services. Like the other papers in the symposium, the research which informs this paper has adopted a multi-method approach to empirical investigation. The research question was again formulated as a result of an educational experience – in this case, an extremely positive experience of online learning – which led the group to seek to identify the factors which led to the “success” of this particular group. The group present a number of insights into the success of the learning experience, whilst still recognising that different individuals benefited in different ways from the experience. They raise some interesting points about the module providing a circular process – with technology as both the medium and the end, with a resultant demystifying of e-learning as a result of immersion and reflection in the process of debating and studying e-learning.

The paper also clarifies the role of the two tutors on this module, which in turn links in with the third paper in the symposium which focuses on the latest phase of research. This is based on obtaining insights into the perceptions and experiences of tutors and students regarding the role of the tutor within the context of the online learning environment. This research is attempting to assess the influence of the tutor on the development of true dialogue in online discussion. Links are made to the concept of tutor “presence” (Anderson et al 2001; Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2005); but the research reveals that not only do different individuals perceive both the nature and practice of ‘facilitation’ differently, but the same individuals perceive different levels of intervention as desirable.

All three papers recognise the complexity of researching levels and types of interaction which occur online; but all three also point to the importance of design, when set alongside both the tutors' intentions and the participants' experiences. Overall the papers discuss what has been widely regarded within the health professions as a very successful programme in preparing and supporting clinical educators in their important educational role in their professions. They demonstrate a continuing questioning and search for "improvement" by both tutors and students who are committed to developing a supportive online community during the duration of the programme, and in some cases – afterwards.

Whilst some of the findings are relatively straightforward, and can provide insights for online programme designers, other findings are more ambiguous. For example we have noted that students can succeed on the programme – in terms of obtaining successful grades for their assessed work, even when they play a more minor role in online discussions. As an educationalist one would expect that this can be explained by differences in learning styles – some students take from any learning experience just what they need, whilst other students engage in a practice-changing experience – they engage in an educational epiphany.

Nevertheless, as tutors, we still have a perception of the ideal online community – one where collaboration is taking place; where experiences are being shared; where resources are being identified and utilised – rather like the one analysed by the participant group in the second paper of this symposium. The reality is that some Learning Sets and Groups live up to that expectation but others do not. This can prompt two different types of response – we can accept that it is just serendipity whether an online learning community interacts and engages in dialogue and debate; or we can continue to conduct action research to try to identify aspects of design, of delivery and of tutor behaviour which might reinforce and support a more dynamic online community within our programmes. By using an action research approach our Clinical Education programme team has continued to redesign programmes and modify delivery practices to further support such dynamic online communities. We are keen to engage in dialogue with other practitioners, researchers and students to exchange ideas about how we can continue to enhance the learning experiences we provide.

## References.

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