Which Media When, and Why?

Erica McAteer, Ian Ruffell, Shanti Williamson and Alison Muirhead

University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

ABSTRACT

The influence of educational context within tutor's roles is illustrated through three case examples from a traditional, campus-based, higher education institution. Different subject disciplines, different student levels, different learning objectives and different categories of learner activity were supported, utilising currently available communication resources. Lecturers recorded learning support interventions during key periods within a single module block or unit within the courses for which they had tutorial responsibility. They extended their log sheets to include self-report commentaries and these, together with intervention records and student feedback through a set of measures , provide data to inform extension of this self-monitoring system to the wider HE and FE community, to better inform resource provision practice.

Keywords

asynchronous conferencing, blended learning, electronic media, on-line forum, tutor roles, virtual learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing availability of electronic media for the support of learning challenges established tutoring practice, forcing questions around media choice which were less explicit in the more 'traditional' settings which situated our own learning experiences.

Asynchronous conferencing systems are used to join up people and resources, supporting communication and the sharing of information between staff and students, regardless of time and location - between those who join. Real-time interaction, virtual or face to face, allows spontaneity and immediacy for interchange of ideas and questions but in practice often impedes it. Digitisation means that wider use of both teaching resources and contributions from students can be made from one teaching year to the next, requiring an extension of critical faculties that may need development. Word-processing now allows online interaction on assignment work, reflective feedback between tutor and learner, and between peers. Lines between feedback, collaboration and plagiarism may need re-drawing. Email is simple to use, effective, and widely available. It has opened the floodgates to a flow of communication between individual students and academic staff, which was previously not available, and may not always be welcome, to overworked staff. Telephone communication allows immediacy (once connected!) but invades privacy. Mobile resources – phones, pda's and combinations – currently fascinate educational research communities because of their potential, it is critical that we develop our understanding of their use in practice.

This presentation reports development work at the University of Glasgow following from three case studies, originally undertaken by institutional members of the Scottish Centre for Research into On-Line Learning and Assessment to complement a discipline-wide pilot project with forty distance tutors across a range of subject disciplines. The SOLACE project, undertaken by SCROLLA in partnership with the Open University Scotland, studied interventions by tutors to support learning development, and their choice of media for intervention purpose (McDonald and McAteer 2003).

BACKGROUND

Institutional context

The University of Glasgow, established in 1455, is a traditional campus-based institution where a major method of teaching is 'the lecture'. Tutorial meetings with lecturing staff for individuals or small groups are common practice for the provision of learning support, particularly for large classes. While some group tutorials are compulsory and in certain cases even require performance to be assessed, many are optional for students to either attend or ignore.

At Glasgow, in common with the global higher education sector, new technologies and government encouragement for their use in learning and teaching brings a range of electronic media resources to close and remote classrooms. Although (at the time of writing) the university has no single Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Blackboard is used in the Faculty of Life Sciences, WebCT in Electronic Engineering, an open source system, Moodle, is used in the Faculy Education and underpins certain 'fully distance' courses round the campus. More generally, departmental web-sites in all faculties provide a range of course resources, including handbooks, study guides, contact information, notice boards, timetables, and, in many cases, course-relevant links to content information through the internet. An increasing number of courses make use of Web-based tools such as WebBoard or I-Campus to provide asynchronous conferencing as a resource for student and student-tutor use. On-line assessment resources include Questionmark, Perception, I-Assess, Triads (see reference section for contact details) as well as open source 'quiz engines' and those provided by the University's current VLE packages. Their assessment purpose is usually formative, for self-assessment during course work or before class exams, but is in some cases summative, with performance outcomes actually counting in course or degree grades. The university library provides an online portal, www.gla.ac.uk/lib/merlin which can be accessed by students and staff on or off campus.

Course contexts

The three courses focused upon for study of intervention and media use at the University of Glasgow are represented in Table 1. All courses represented had conferencing software as part of course resource provision, and all course lecturers made use of it for tutorial purposes with their learner groups.

Table 1: Courses participating in the University of Glasgow's study of tutorial intervention and media use.

Courses	Provision mode	Role of on-line conference	Class size/Tutorial group size
Undergraduate, Year 2 Classic Civilisation: 'Conflict and Change in Ancient Greece and Rome'	Campus based	Required preparation for face to face seminar	80/20
Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice	Work based	Requested provision of examples from practice, discussion of theory	40/5-6
Postgraduate Master of Philosophy in Medical Law	Distance	Encouraged for discussion of course content	12/12

Although all based at the same higher education institution, the three courses under scrutiny differed considerably in their learning and teaching contexts, teaching aims, learning objectives and outcomes, and tutorial resource provision. They also differ greatly in the level and nature of their learners.

Classic Civilisation 2B: Conflict and Change in Ancient Greece and Rome:

A second level undergraduate module offered by the Department of Classics at the University of Glasgow. Its main purpose is to introduce students to a range of different kinds of ancient political writing and, through study of internal and external conflict in Greece and republican Rome, including historiography and oratory; explore interrelationships between political theory and behaviour and historical change. Students will be taking the course either as a basis for an honours degree in Classics or a cognate discipline, or as an option within a degree course in another discipline. The module is mainly taught through lectures (three each week) with fortnightly tutorial meetings, and assessed through essays and an exam.

PG Certificate in Academic Practice:

The University of Glasgow's 'New Lecturer/Teacher Programme' is compulsory for new teaching staff. It is a two-year part time course offering two modules: the first covers a range of teaching and learning issues through face to face or on-line workshops, unit handbooks and readings. The second, running in parallel with the first but intensifying during year two, supports individual course participants through small tutorial groups for development of portfolios evidencing competence in their subject disciplines. The course, accredited by the UK Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE), as peer- and tutor-assessed through portfolio.

PG M.Phil in Medical Law:

The Distance Learning Programme in Medical Law (DLP) is a course offered by the Institute of Law and Ethics in Medicine at the University of Glasgow. It comprises three years of part-time study towards the degree of MPhil in Medical Law. The first and the second years of study are structured around modules devoted to particular topic areas. Students are provided with materials for each module, which consist of course notes, reading lists, activities, reflection and analysis points, and details of the essay question(s). Students also attend three residential teaching weekends in the first and second years of the course, providing face to face teaching through seminars and discussion groups, and opportunities to meet with other students and with tutors. Assessment is through module essays and, in the final year, a dissertation.

Tutor roles

Despite the considerable differences between the case examples, the three lecturer participants in this study have much in common (aside from all working for the same academic institution!). All are 'experts' in the subject discipline of study, all have responsibility for provision of course content, of learning support and of assignment guidance and assessment. Consideration by the three participants of the tutor roles, central and peripheral, identified in Paper One for this symposium (Denis et al, 2004) for their individual course contexts allows their (rough) assignment of role 'presence' and role 'emphasis'. Table 2 shows that, though all tutor roles are served by all lecturers, the different contexts imply interesting differences in emphasis.

Table 2: Tutor Roles for three course lecturers. One star indicates low emphasis of role, five stars indicates high emphasis.

Tutor Role	Central / Peripheral	Classical Civilisation	Academic Practice	Medical Law
A Content facilitator	C	*****	***	****
B Metacognition facilitator	C	*****	*****	*****
C Process facilitator	C	*****	***	**
D Advisor/Counsellor	C	*****	*	****
E Assessor (formative, summative)	C	*****	*****	*****
F Technologist	C	*	*	***
G Resource provider	C	*****	*****	*
H Designer	P	****	****	**
I Manager/administrator	P	**	***	**
J Researcher	P	*****	*****	*****
K Co-learner	P	*	*****	**

The interest for this study lies in reflection upon perceptions of tutor roles, student and teacher experience of learning support provision, learning activities and outcomes. All three case example lecturers, as participants in SOLACE, reviewed their own teaching contexts through the lens provided by its outcomes. 'Tutor roles and their application in context' was not an explicit theme within the SOLACE work but, as course lecturers and associate lecturers across sector and discipline logged their tutorial interventions and their medium of use, critical issues of concern emerged. These were developed through the project discussion boards and through

face-to-face meetings of participants, and in this work we take up those aspects which, we feel, qualify both teacher and student perceptions of tutor roles.

ISSUES FOR REFLECTION

Outcomes from the SOLACE work inform current concerns and question some of the implicit assumptions underpinning present practice in student support. Figure 3 is an attempt to organize and clarify emergent concerns and themes for reflection.

Figure 1: Tutor concerns as evidenced through discussion by SOLACE participants (data drawn from discussion boards and an away-day session, adapted from Macdonald & McAteer 2004, p 175)

Context of intervention

Relationship/relevance of tutorial intervention to other course events and resources, eg, lectures, readings, study activities, practical work, assignment performance..

Relationship/relevance of tutorial group events to larger class events (whether on-line or face-to-face, or as blended learning provision)

Relationship/relevance of group tutorial intervention to one-on-one tutorial contacts

"Quality' of intervention: what do tutors see as valuable

Ability to cover range different topics

Flexibility – to help group, plus individuals

Interactivity – able to tailor intervention in response to reaction

Timeliness – relationship to assignments particularly

Supporting learning – whose learning?

Level playing field – same support to all students? Duplication, redundancy?

Choice of medium

Media availability, accessibility

Medium affordance

Demands of group/individual

Proactive/reactive implications

e-Tutoring or face-to-face tutoring - what are the conditions for success?

A critically important, obvious only through hindsight, question emerged from the SOLACE project: 'Perhaps we need to revisit what we do?' To do this in any way that can genuinely inform practice requires some effort to capture and record 'what we do' and submit such record to scrutiny by ourselves, our peers and, importantly our students. Though this has (certainly!) always been true, it is perhaps particularly relevant at this moment of technological, pedagogical and policy change across all educational sectors.

We know already that we need to be wary of "dressing up old pedagogies in new technologies" and thereby missing opportunities for realising new ways of teaching that exploit the best of available technologies in the service of student learning. To support this endeavour, we need to develop (in partnership with teachers and students across subject disciplines and across sector) flexibile 'activity design' models to test the current and potential resource(s) for pedagogic and practical functionality. To develop instruments which test target resources to the highest possible limits, we currently need to evaluate use against aims for a range of key pedagogic functions in relevant learning contexts.

Two examples of provision, underpinning assumptions and reflective questions which emerged from SOLACE are given below:

Traditional assignment feedback: will reach all individuals in the group; relatively rich in quality of intervention, in terms of breadth of aspects covered, often poor on timeliness, close to zero interactivity, impact on learning? Are there for instance elements of correspondence tuition which could be delivered to the group instead?

> *Face to face tutorials:*   great on breadth of coverage, interactivity, timeliness, flexibility group/individual work; but reaches small minority of students; and are they the ones needing help? Is this what students want?   For group interventions, whatever the medium, there is a significant overhead in encouraging participation, and rounding up stragglers: is this good use of the tutor's time?

Still working at a small scale, to allow 'safe' development of tools and procedures for wider enquiry, outcomes from the three case examples described here will be disseminated to the wider research and practice community through NL2004 and through the EQUEL research network.

METHOD OF STUDY

For the duration of the study all participating lecturers recorded learning support interventions during key periods within a single module block or lecture unit within the courses for which they had tutorial responsibility.   Intervention purpose (administrative, pastoral, conceptual support, skills development, assignment feedback, etc) was logged against media of use (email, face-to-face, telephone, e-conference, paper-based).

Figure 2: Intervention log for lecturer use, showing function of intervention against medium used to achieve it.

Intervention function	Medium used								
	Contacts with group				Contacts with individuals				
	notice board	letter	face to face	e-forum or mail list	phone	face to face	email	letter	other
Administration or management									
Encouragement or advising									
Reinforcement of concepts									
Assignment preparation									
Assignment feedback									
Study processes									
Other									

A second instrument to complement and inform reflection on the log data gathered is a "Learning Resource Questionnaire". Case participant lecturers have provided a checklist of learning resource provision to the students on their courses, with an indication of their availability and a statement of potential pedagogic value and intended use (see Table X). Through this, students will be asked to indicate, against each item, whether they used it, how useful it was (and why), how easily accessed, how critical for their study etc. This checklist could be administered during a course, during exam revision and, perhaps, after an exam. In previous formats and adaptations, this instrument has been administered to students during evaluations of innovation in several different teaching disciplines across the University of Glasgow and outside it. The instrument has two main functions: to look at students' independent learning strategies, in the context of a   department's teaching resources; to evaluate those resources - including of course those directly relating to interventions of immediate concern.

Figure 3: Learning resource questionnaire, for completion by case example lecturers, to be developed for student indication of use, and usefulness, of resources.

Learning resource	Availability comment (eg number, access time, etc)	Intended value/use
Lectures		
Course texts		
Group tutorial activities (face to face)		
Group tutorial activities (on-line)		
Course seminars (face to face)		
Course seminars (on-line)		
Practical work		
Field trips		
Handouts		
Course handbook		
Individual meetings with lecturer		
Course readings		
Course assignments		
Exams		
On-line course information and subject links		
On-line assessment – quizzes and questions		
On-line course tools (databases, word-processing, analytical resources etc)		
On-line conference for a		
E-mail communication		
Collaboration with fellow students		
Outside support (family, friends, workplace…)		
Other resources not listed here		

Information drawn through the two instruments described here provides the grounds for reflection by lecturers and students upon perceptions of tutor roles for learning support in these particular course contexts, and on the pedagogical practices through which these roles are realised.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

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