

# Evaluation Report; Tutorial 2, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2003

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## Summary

This tutorial achieved its overall aim and provided the project team with further experience of on-line synchronous communication. Although the learning outcomes were only partially achieved, it raised issues about the interplay between the medium and the tutorial process which are worthy of further attention. It also generated a number of questions about the capacity of synchronous discussion to support higher order outcomes. Both areas are considered in subsequent tutorials.

## Aim and learning outcomes for the tutorial

### *Aim*

To consider how the SLTN might explore the use of ICT to support widening participation

### *Learning outcomes*

Participants will be able to:

- Raise their awareness of possible strategies for using ICT to support wider participation
- Critically engage with pedagogical and practical issues
- Identify ways in which the SLTN might collaborate to use ICT to meet specific WP needs

## Evaluation Sources

1. Facilitator's personal reflections
2. Participant contributions to the on-line discussion before and after the tutorial
3. No session archive is available for this tutorial.

## Did the tutorial achieve its aims?

The tutorial did achieve its aim, though perhaps not in quite the way anticipated. By the end, it was clear that there was no consensus among participants about how the use of ICT to support widening participation might be explored collaboratively within the SLTN. If further explorations are to take place, they are likely to be undertaken by individual institutions or in smaller partnerships.

## Did participants achieve the intended 'learning' outcomes?

In order to allow participants to explore aspects of the synchronous on-line tutorial from a different dimension, the learning outcomes of Tutorial 2 were intentionally more challenging than those for the introductory tutorial. The second outcome, in particular, was designed to explore how far the medium would be able to support the higher order exchanges that are often at the heart of academic development sessions.

The facilitator's evaluation is that this tutorial achieved only some of its intended outcomes. The first was achieved. The second was partially achieved, but not at sufficient depth. The third was not achieved, apart from a consideration of whether the project partners might run a joint staff development event.

The likelihood that the outcomes were over-ambitious is acknowledged. However, lack of achievement of the second outcome raised important questions for the facilitator about the capacity of synchronous tutorials to support higher order activity.

## **Evaluation from the tutorial facilitator's perspective**

Planning for the tutorial took approximately two hours and represented a reasonable investment of time. Readings on the use of ICT for widening participation were made available on-line before the tutorial and enriched the discussion. Technical skills did not prove a barrier to participation. However, the depth of discussion was relatively limited and raised questions about the capacity of the synchronous mode to support outcomes that might arguably have been achieved through a face to face tutorial.

### **1. Quality of discussion**

Although participation was enthusiastic, the tendency of synchronous discussion to prompt short messages and little opportunity for reflection was again evident. The depth of discussion was limited, possibly by the scope of the subject matter, which was arguably too ambitious. Echoing comments on the first tutorial, participants agreed that the papers themselves might have been addressed more directly. The danger of deterring people from reading by not picking up the issues generated by them was acknowledged. In the post-conference discussion, the group agreed on the need to be clear about the purpose of introductory readings and the expectation that facilitators should ensure they are considered in discussion.

However, as facilitator of this particular tutorial, I wondered how far the opportunity to engage in detail with academic papers is constrained by the challenge of managing too many variables on-line and the absence of the physical prompt of the papers themselves. This may be an extension of the difficulty that facilitators experience contributing at depth while they are managing the technology as well as the discussion. In this tutorial, the constraint of being able to write brief responses in a limited time seemed to circumscribe the actions of facilitator and participants alike, and the extent to which the technology acted as a neutral or deterministic influence is worthy of further exploration.

The level of facilitation required to sustain a worthwhile discussion within these parameters seemed to represent a significant challenge. Although the discussions flowed reasonably well, the low number of participants required a level of active participation from the facilitator that caused tensions with the facilitator role. The facilitator was also conscious of the need to be more 'managerial' than in a live setting in order to adhere to timing and summarise before moving on. Although this did help move the discussion forward, it arguably introduced a level of artificiality rarely evident in a live tutorial, where interventions can more easily be interspersed with the content without needing to be flagged explicitly.

Explicit intervention may have inhibited the discussion of important issues that lay outside the framework of the tutorial. In the early stages, for instance, it became clear that one participant disagreed with the philosophy of the two key papers. Negotiating this area occupied the first ten minutes. In the asynchronous discussion after the tutorial, debate emerged about alternative ways of handling such occurrences on-line.

No agreement was reached over how far it might be possible to use the synchronous mode in isolation to uncover general reactions before tackling specific issues.

The 'traditional' alternative would be to use the discussion board before the tutorial to post an initial response to the issues raised by the papers. This integrated use of synchronous and asynchronous modes might have helped the group understand individual perspectives before the chat session and agree to focus on particular aspects of widening participation. It might also have allowed the facilitator to engage more fully with the different frames of reference in play during the tutorial. However, in a live tutorial of an hour, the facilitator would arguably have had the time to achieve this. If an equivalent consensus can not be negotiated easily in synchronous tutorials, where facilitation requires active management of the technology as well as the process, it seems reasonable to ask how desirable or efficient it is to compensate by complicating the delivery mix through the addition of asynchronous activity.

## **2. Technology**

Members of the group appeared to be more comfortable with the technology in the second tutorial. All participants were able to input and move text, and the use of the whiteboard was smoother, leading to a more fruitful interplay between it and the discussion. This was almost certainly due to greater familiarity and the opportunity to practice collaborative work on the whiteboard beforehand. The simple activity of writing headings to three slides beforehand also proved beneficial to achieving the tasks in a limited time.

All participants managed to make regular contributions. Although there were approximately 214 separate postings during the hour - a similar number to the first tutorial - the interchanges seemed more rapid. Greater familiarity with the technology and with each other on-line may have played a part. One participant made the point that interacting with three participants was easier than four. The problem of questions and answers arriving out of synch was reduced without adopting a system for regulating postings. Even without agreed protocols, the group was more sophisticated about interspersing comments about the on-line process with comments on the subject matter of the tutorial.

Two of the three participants agreed that Blackboard generated particular frustrations. The inability to edit text on the whiteboard was frustrating. The absence of a cue to archive the session before starting the discussion proved to be a significant drawback and the failure to start the archive at the beginning led to considerable extra work at the end, trying to recall key points. A simple prompt by Blackboard at the outset, or even automatic archiving, might help avoid this. The inability to copy and paste a chat session compounded the problem as, despite saving the whiteboard slides, we were unable to save the discussion by cutting and pasting it within, or outside, Blackboard.

It is clearly in the interests of a synchronous tutorial group to develop similar levels of proficiency with the learning environment and a shared approach to dealing with its limitations. This is likely to be particularly important if such facilities are to be used with a group who are less favourably disposed to the technology, or who require motivation or confidence-building activities.

## Issues from Tutorial 2

This section highlights issues relating to the evolution of the group's understanding of synchronous conferencing capabilities. The facilitator of Tutorial 2 considered the following aspects worthy of particular attention in subsequent tutorials.

### *Technical issues*

- i. Problems with firewalls persisted from the first tutorial and the facilitator had to work from an IP address outside the firewall in order to access the virtual classroom. The importance of working with IT networks and systems teams to resolve such issues well in advance should not be underestimated.
- ii. Where this version of Blackboard is used for future tutorials, it will be helpful to remind each other to start the archive before beginning the tutorial. A checklist may be needed to ensure clarity about what is expected from facilitators and participants.
- iii. Practice with tools such as the whiteboard is essential if the technology is not to prove a distraction during the tutorial. Familiarisation with the technology in the hour before Tutorial 2 proved invaluable. In the absence of visual communication, the use of the telephone to support practice on-line was seen as essential for achieving clarity within a short timescale.

### *Facilitation*

The facilitator of Tutorial 1 urged other facilitators to attend to good timing, provide periodic summaries and separate comments about the tutorial and technology from those on the subject matter. Tutorial 2 suggests that achieving this at the same time as managing the technology is not a trivial matter. On-line facilitators are likely to need a great deal of familiarity if they are to become proficient.

Useful suggestions were made about how the tutorial group might have explored background knowledge and agreed the terms of engagement before starting the synchronous discussion. Mapping the territory more explicitly than in live tutorials may be required to establish a common understanding of issues to be tackled.

### *Synchronisation*

Tutorial 1 highlighted the need for facilitators to strive for greater synchronisation between questions and responses in discussion. Although synchronisation improved in Tutorial 2, problems with out of sequence text and errors in typing still occurred. The lower number of participants and greater familiarity with the medium helped alleviate the problem, but the question remains as to how far such problems are an inherent aspect of using the on-line environment.

### *Contribution to the outcomes of the project*

Tutorial 2 offered further insights into how synchronous on-line tutorials might be used. It enabled the group to explore how far the mode can support pedagogical discussion. Like other teaching methods, synchronous discussion may be most effective in conjunction with other modes. The alternative might be to use it for specific purposes, such as the generation of initial ideas or the agreement of final draft documents. Return on investment should be an important consideration, as the tutorial made clear that even experienced users require a significant level of preparation to generate an appropriate level of activity.