

# Evaluation Report: Tutorial 3 held on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2003

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## Summary

This tutorial achieved its aim and enabled participants to demonstrate critical engagement with a range of online practices. It demonstrated the value of linking the synchronous tutorial to other contributory technologies as learning resources despite the limitations of the group web browser. It highlighted the constraints imposed by the synchronous technology, the importance of the pre-session meeting for preparing for the tutorial proper, and the significance of building ground rules and protocols for the technical and social conduct of group interactions.

## Introduction

The aim of the session was to consider pedagogical strategies for learning and teaching through ICT. The learning outcomes for participants were that they would be able to:

- Critically review current practices in online learning and teaching
- Analyse educational interactions associated with the creation and use of web-based learning scenarios
- Consider opportunities for selecting appropriate mixes of educational technologies to meet specific curriculum design issues.

## Methodology

Evaluation was based on analysis of:

- the session archive (Appendix 1)
- whiteboard snapshots (Appendix 2)
- participant feedback in the online discussion and through personal communication following the tutorial (Appendix 3)
- facilitator's reflections, before, during, and after, the session.

## Evaluation questions

Analysis is focused around three conceptual domains, the technology; tutorial facilitation; and participant engagement. In identifying factors and experiences in each of these domains, it is hoped to illuminate three key questions: Is the medium appropriate for teacher-led tutorial interactions with learners? Is it a question of getting the facilitation processes right? Is the technology too limiting for our purposes?

## Benefits

- Building on previous experiences with Tutorials 1 and 2
- Using practical examples of web based learning previewed by participants as a basis for informed discussion
- Sharing a range of online web resources during the synchronous tutorial

## Issues

- Out of synch messaging
- Group browser unable to facilitate the sharing of web sites in common across participants' browsers
- Difficulties of guiding discussion where cues are confined to synchronous text messages

- Finding ways of overcoming the technology's steer to short one-liner messages which are less conducive to the development of ideas and arguments.

## **Discussion**

### ***Learning outcomes, participation and learning***

Content analysis of the archive and whiteboard snapshots suggests the learning outcomes were largely achieved (Appendix 1 and 2). Participants were able to critically review current practices in online learning and teaching by reference to online practice examples and identified a variety of components necessary to encourage learning in web-based learning scenarios. However time was limited for drawing the key threads together at the end of the session. Limiting the range of online examples shared would have quickened the pace of discussion (Appendix 3:7, 11).

The whiteboard pages were used to summarise each part of the discussion but it was difficult for the facilitator to manage the flow of discussion while also collating feedback on the whiteboard (Appendix 2). It would be possible to delegate this collation task to one of the participants but this could detract from their engagement in the online discussion.

Analysis of the online tutorial transcript identifies 55 postings in the pre-tutorial meeting and 227 postings during the online tutorial (Appendix 1). Although the number of postings varied between participants (92, 74, 17), all contributed to the discussion and engaged with the resources provided. The online conversations raised a range of significant issues and the level of interaction was good, which suggested some depth of debate. However learning opportunities were limited by the nature of the medium, reflected in comments from participants like:

"I shared some of my ideas but at a superficial level....Messages are totally out of synch. You see a message and want to respond. You think and type and then see a new message on the screen. It is very difficult to synchronise." (Appendix 3: 1.4, 4.4)

The chat medium promotes short messages, which are more conducive to surface comments than the development of an in-depth discussion, evidenced in participant and facilitator comments:

"You can't say much in one or two lines or analyse in depth. You need time and space to explore in depth. I do not think the medium facilitates this." (Appendix 3: 2)

"The inability to use key senses of speech and hearing for transmitting and processing information and ideas at speed seemed to be a considerable drawback as a facilitator. This was especially evident when trying to explain how to access sites and navigate to examples of different practice within them using text mode only." (Appendix 3:13.1)

This statement reinforces the need for a pre-session meeting to deal with technical issues prior to the tutorial proper (Appendix 3: 13).

### ***Online processes and facilitation***

The participation process was focused around a series of discussion questions, which tended to elicit one-liner responses. Pace of discussion was variable. The facilitator's perspective was that of speedy, quick-fire group interactions, while participants shared a variety of reactions, from feeling the tutorial "was slow at times", to describing how you "are voiceless here unless you are a very quick writer", to a sense of contributions being disjointed (Appendix 3: 4).

The medium appeared to be influencing the group processes at work. As in previous tutorials, the single mode of communication created a sense of urgency demanding responses, rather than allowing for pauses. One participant summed up this experience as “Too much emphasis is put on speaking rather than listening” (Appendix 3: 5.3). The tutorial process, as part of a sequence, could benefit from early building of negotiated ground rules for the conduct of discussions, which encompass group interaction protocols for managing turn-taking and listening and reflection as well as speaking (Appendix 3: 5).

The facilitation process involved balancing time constraints and moving participants forward, whilst encouraging participants to interact, allowing the discussion to flow, and supporting peer interaction and responses (Appendix 3: 7). When facilitating this tutorial it had not been fully appreciated how much text-only communication could reduce the development of the discussion, when compared with experiences of facilitating a similar topic focus in face-to-face workshops. Preparing facilitation notes and cues for online transmission in advance of the session proved very helpful, but it was difficult to keep track of the online discussion when scanning through these notes (Appendix 3: 7). The constraints of the synchronous technology, relying on inputs in text-only mode, can be countered by keeping the focus of the debate concise and limited to one or two activities (Appendix 3: 8). Facilitation techniques for cueing, signposting and pacing are important in managing the online tutorial (Appendix 3: 4.2, 7), but it is also suggested that:

“The technology makes unreasonable demands of a facilitator. It is very hard to draw threads. The medium mitigates against anyone using effectively.” (Appendix 3: 7.4)

### ***Technology considerations***

This online tutorial was reliant on contributory technologies to achieve the intended learning outcomes. This is reflected in the comment:

“I certainly felt that having the resources (the web sites) at my fingertips was a huge asset. On several occasions I opened the applications to test something out prior to making a comment.” (Appendix 3: 12).

However the use of the group web browser technology highlighted a number of limitations. It did not allow shared navigation within web sites or web addresses to be stored and retrieved as required, or addresses to be copied and pasted into the group browser input box (Appendix 3: 10). These limitations necessitated the creation of a web page of online learning and teaching practice examples to facilitate the session and relied on participants being able to work at a distance with two web browser windows open (Appendix 3: 6.1). Access difficulties arising, highlighted the need for voice contact in the pre-session meeting to deal with technical issues prior to the tutorial proper (Appendix 3: 13).

### **Conclusions**

Analysis has focussed on three conceptual domains, participant engagement, tutorial facilitation, and the technologies used. Each domain impinges on and is influenced by the others and variable measures of success can be concluded within each of the three domains. This tutorial enabled participants to demonstrate critical engagement with a range of online practices. The experience has shown that the medium can support teacher-led tutorial interactions, despite its limitations.

“The technology was not a barrier, it had enabled me to be involved. Of course face to face might have been better,. A workshop situation would probably have been best – but on-line at a distance was OK.” (Appendix 3: 14.1).

### ***Learning points***

A number of key learning points have been identified as a result of facilitating the online tutorial:

- Developing familiarity with the whiteboard and group browser in advance of the session
- Preparing facilitator notes and cues for online transmission in advance of the session to facilitate synchronous communication in the discussion board.
- Importance of pre-tutorial hour for troubleshooting technical matters and agreeing protocols for managing group browser and whiteboard.
- Appreciating the concept of the online tutorial relies on the use of contributory technologies (pdf documents, web links, asynchronous discussions) for its success and the ease and readiness of participants to engage with these in advance of the tutorial.
- Where the session relies on preparatory work by participants in advance of the session, recognising the importance of alerting participants early, and allowing enough lead-in time for this work to be completed.
- Accounting for individual differences among participants, including different learning styles, technological experience, and expectations
- Developing protocols for managing turn-taking, listening, reflection and speaking
- Recognising the need for ground rules for the conduct of discussions
- Acknowledging that you cannot achieve as much online in the same time period as you can face-to-face.

This facilitation experience has demonstrated two particularly significant factors, which can contribute to the success of the online tutorial:

- 1) the value of linking the synchronous tutorial to other contributory technologies as learning resources;  
Situating the online tutorial within an integrated online learning environment, which enables posting of pre- and post-tutorial activities in the form of pdf documents, web links, and asynchronous messaging is a key ingredient for success (Appendix 3: 1.2, 1.3, 3.1, 12).
- 2) the importance of building ground rules and protocols for the technical and social conduct of discussions;  
Developing an appreciation of the different experiences and expectations shared by participants, reveals the significance of accounting for individual differences – technical expertise, learner expectations, and learning styles – in preparing and delivering an online tutorial (Appendix 3: 4, 6).