Evaluation Report: Tutorial 4 Draft

Prepared by the Tutorial Facilitator Clare Furneaux. November 17 2003

Summary

Introduction

The aim and intended Learning Outcomes for the session were:

Aims of session
1. To consider online student assessment
2. To experience an online simulation task

Session Outcomes
Participants to be able to:
* Outline and critically review current practices in online assessment in one academic context
* Make recommendations for the use of online assessment in one context
* Describe the experience of an online simulation.

Evaluation Sources

1. The session archive
2. Facilitator's personal reflections
3. Participant contributions to the on-line discussion before and after the tutorial

Did the tutorial achieve its aims?

The archive demonstrates that facilitator and participants discussed online student assessment, and they all experienced an online simulation task.

Did participants achieve the intended 'learning' outcomes?

This is more problematic. With regard to the first outcome above, we outlined current practices in online student assessment but did not manage to review them. The pre-simulations discussion had allowed people to raise issues from their thinking and reading in role and the tutor started by asking people to consider the issues which had been identified (which were presented on the Whiteboard – see Archive Tut 4). This meant the first 20 minutes of the tutorial was spent discussing how/if higher order thinking skills could be assessed online. Only then did we turn to the first task: reviewing online forms of assessment. We discussed test and quizzes briefly, then turned to the need for assessment beyond MCQs and the rationale for testing at all. Discussion then turned to the possible benefits of student peer online discussion of assessment issues (vs equivalent f2f sessions).

These discussions formed the basis of the Recommendations summary on the Whiteboard, which was added to in the final part of the tutorial. We agreed in the end that there were wider issues associated with the adoption of CAA, that needed to be addressed by any academic department (eg purposes of testing within a university,

need for further research on pilot projects, QA, national policies) before any kind of detailed recommendations about various forms of online assessment could be made. This meant that the second learning outcome was not met – though we did discuss many of the big picture issues associated with the topic.

The third outcome is harder to assess as participants were not asked to do this formally, though their comments below show they rated the tutorial as largely successful.

Evaluation from the tutorial facilitator's perspective:

1. **Preparation for the tutorial**.
   A considerable amount of time (6 hours) went into planning the simulation:
   - thinking of a context for the simulation,
   - identifying and describing roles,
   - finding readings to support the roles,
   - setting up a Blackboard pre-simulation and post-simulation discussion forums and posting messages to get/keep the ball rolling.

   This is probably only worth doing if the simulation can be used more than once – or if participants undertake to prepare a simulation as part of their learning experience.

2. **During the tutorial**
   The facilitator's role here was Chair of a working party meeting. It was quite a challenge to remain in role, chair the meeting online and also keep the tutorial going (eg if people started acting out of role, I felt I had to nudge them back into it). This was on top of working with the technology: using the Whiteboard and staying in the discussion (my computer crashed, and I was thrown off Blackboard for 11 minutes). This combined to make for a fairly stressful event for the facilitator, which might become more routine with practice– but not, in my opinion, given the constraints of using Blackboard (see notes below). In particular, I found using the Whiteboard to record our points, which taking part on a synchronous written discussion, much more cumbersome than running a similar session in class. Old fashioned blackboard and chalk began to feel very user-friendly!

   With regard to the content, I think this was too ambitious for a one-hour session. It was probably also necessary to have a meeting to discuss the big issues first before trying to make recommendations in a specified context.

3. **After the tutorial** Tasks remained from the simulation**:** a follow-up Blackboard discussion on the simulation topic and the report that was the outcome of the simulation. This was actually quite onerous and maybe, in a real world context, could be tasks assigned to tutorial participants as part of their learning.

4. **Overall**:
   - All participants (especially the facilitator) did some reading, thinking and discussion on the topic of the tutorial. However, we were a highly motivated group – I wonder how far less motivated colleagues or students would have been prepared to do this.

- Discussion would have been much easier, and more conclusive, f2f without the stress of the online environment. However, this might be reduced with practice or a different virtual environment.
- Online simulations can work with a motivated and co-operative group of participants who are prepared to do the preparation and then participate in role.
- The simulation format worked well:
    a. There was an element of information–gap and information transfer with participants having read different texts on the topic for their roles
    b. Discussing in a simulation role may be easier/more natural in a virtual environment than a f2f one.
    c. The VLE allowed for asynchronous discussion before and after the synchronous discussion took place, all as part of the simulation. This reflected what might happen in the real world, provided more learning and discussion time, and allowed for people who are more comfortable in an asynchronous context.

Problems, solutions and conclusions from Tutorial 4 to pass on to future tutorial organisers

This tutorial clearly has accessory aims that related to the project rather than to the learner support of participants. It aimed to help discover aspects of the 'synchronous on-line tutorial' that worked and those that did not and to promote the development of all project members. Discussion after the tutorial focussed on these aspects and resulted in the production of a 'Lessons Learned' document attached below this section.

Lessons Learned from Tutorial 4

Participants' Comments	Category or theme	Lesson to learn? From one facilitator to another.
There was a lot of setting-up time: working out the Simulation, finding relevant readings, designing roles, contacting people, reading the discussion messages and filleting them for the Whiteboard. I really enjoyed doing all this (a stimulating change from the marking I SHOULD have been doing!), but I think it is probably only really worth doing for students if you are going to be able to use the material again. And I still have to produce a Working Party summary...	Facilitator's preparation	
Preparation - was there too much? I was very aware that poor Kerry only got back on Monday, and that I hadn't got thru to Paul by e-mail until Friday. I think it helped having done it, however (thanks, guys!). (facilitator)

I found being asked to prepare so fully in the first teaching fortnight quite a challenge. However, the amount of preparation undertaken by the tutor encouraged me to carry out the tasks we were allocated before the meeting. I thought the asynchronous postings before the tutorial worked very well.

The preparation required for the tutorial did feel quite onerous, when there are many other demands on our time. But I think the readings and asynchronous messages provided a good foundation for the session. | Content: amount of pre-tutorial preparation | |
| Once again, too much for an hour. I think limiting the task to a set of recommendations for the Department would have been sufficient. Trying to also summarise advants and disadvants of numerous forms of e-assessment was just madness! (Facilitator)

I guess that I did feel that we attempted too much and that there was a lot of preparation...but this was a | Content: amount during tutorial | |

topic that we are interested in and probably anticipated this. I agree we probably attempted too much in the hour, trying to tackle different forms of e-assessment and recommendations but the process led to a lively debate.		
Bottom line: we didn't accomplish the Working Party Meeting objectives. (Facilitator) I would say that we did have a fair go at all three session outcomes. Given that we didn't achieve the Working Party objectives, I suspect we have to think carefully about why we may not have gained a full return on the investment made beforehand. I have my suspicions that the technology might have played a part in this, but I'm not sure how much. I've tried to address some of the issues in the Technology section.	Content: accomplishing objectives	
I thought the pre-meeting messages in the Discussion forum were good - clearly people had engaged with their reading and the issues raised in their role. I had hoped this would mean we could cover more in the Meeting itself - not sure that was the case. What do you think? It did give me issues to put up on the Whiteboard to get us started - but we didn't really discuss them, did we? (facilitator)	Simulation: pre-meeting discussion	
Was I too domineering? Felt I was as I panicked when I realised I was going to have to type everything in and couldn't use my prepared text. Also quickly realised the time constraint and became pre-occupied with getting thru the agenda... (Facilitator) No I am asking myself as a facilitator and as a participant if the group dynamics matter and how they can be managed? I guess where the facilitator has set up a scenario to creatively generate disparate views, issues of group dynamics and variable participation will occur whether collaborating f2f or online. But I think it is much harder for the tutor to manage the group dynamics and participation in the online tutorial where	Simulation: group dynamics	

threads get lost as conversations rapidly change directions and the technology only allows textual cues and flagging. Are there ways round this in terms of tips and techniques we might offer tutors and participants as a result of our experiences here?		
I think it worked reasonably well. As facilitator, I felt a pressure to try to keep people in role - got worried at one point when I thought Kerry was getting a bit too sceptical and he was supposed to be the teccie enthusiast! I deliberately gave Paul and Kerry roles I thought might be different to their natural leanings - how did you feel that went? Was it too much of a distraction or did it help engage with the subject matter (as I hoped)? (facilitator) I really enjoyed this. Yes I felt happier about being Les Patterson than being the person who was very enthusiastic about all things on-line. But the role was good for me. It allowed me to dominate the discussion far more than I would normally be comfortable with.....and Clare didnt stop me. It also encouraged critical thought...if not critical articulation. The role play was interesting and no Clare, you were not domineering. I enjoyed reading the asynchronous postings and adopting roles helped us establish different positions before the tutorial. Once the tutorial had begun, though, I felt the roles produced some rather unhelpful dynamics and, occasionally, a tendency for particular voices to be heard more than others:-) I suspect we would have generated enough debate without carrying the roles into the tutorial itself. I valued the potential of role-playing to generate different and contrasting viewpoints. I did not think you were domineering in your role as facilitator, but felt some elements of dominance and game-playing among participants :-) I valued the potential of role-playing to generate different and contrasting viewpoints. I did not think you were domineering in your role as facilitator, but felt some elements of dominance and game-playing among participants :-).	Simulation: roles	

I now really have serious reservations about using Blackboard for synchronous online work. Issues that arose for me today: 1. As Chair/facilitator, I had prepared Word text (introductory, explaining how the meeting would progress and the role of the Whiteboard, moving on chunks) which I'd have liked to cut and paste into the chat box to save time in the meeting. But couldn't do it - because, of course, Blackboard uses Java here and it's therefore not possible to add Word created text. This makes preparing to overcome technical/typing handicaps a problem. I'd also prepared a lovely table to help us romp thru the forms of assessment advants/disadvants summary bit of the Meeting -and couldn't use it. 2. This meant I had to do all the important meeting management stuff that a Chair does quickly verbally by typing in the text box. All too slow... 3. This was also while trying to record key points on the Whiteboard - which is NOT user-friendly - all that switching between parts of the screen, clicking on parts to change from moving text mode to adding text, inability to edit text once it's up there etc. Ghastly! And then - final indignity- my server coudn't cope (don't blame it!), my screen froze and I had to re-boot my machine and log in again. Lost several minutes of chairing time - thank goodness you all kept going so well. Wonder what students would do in that situation?? 4. Maybe I need to find out more about how the Whiteboard works (oh no, does that mean having to go to the dreadful Blackboard website??), but my present impression is that it is too crude a tool for anything other than simple brainstorming. 5. Today's experience reinfoced for me again that you need different roles in the tutorial - record keeper/Whiteboard struggler and timekeeper being two. But these are familiarity and skills issues.We discovered early on that cut and paste did not work...hence the need to prepare whiteboard pages in advance. I do not think that it is fair to blame the technology for its limitations...(It didnt bring me a cup of tea when I asked either In relation to your comments about preparing Word text to save time in the meeting . when facilitating Tutorial 3, I found I could copy and paste prepared text by clicking on the Compose button. It opens a window into which text can be pasted using a right mouse click. It is cumbersome but does allow you to share prepared text, though I found I needed to rapidly edit and segment text as I went along.	Technology

Perhaps other programmes are better but there is often a balance...complex programmes have more functions but you have to learn the skills to cope with the complexity. Just as important is to plan the activities in line with the programmes limitations. My message to Blackboard would be to scrap the shared browser and make the whiteboard and archiving facilities more intuitive. Also to have some sort of measure of the Bandwith currently available and that needed to allow the technology to work Like Clare, I have reservations about the technology. Some of them are general; others relate specifically to Blackboard. I agree that the technology got in the way and suspect that negotiating the inflexibilities of the medium made it difficult to develop discussion at depth in all the tutorials. Blackboard seems particularly clunky for what we were trying to do - the whiteboard is unfriendly, the archive probably needs to come on by default and the inability to paste into the chat box is very irritating. I think there were enough variables in play in the tutorial without having to attend to things like the interplay between the whiteboard and chat box. As a participant, I found it managing everything difficult; as facilitator in an earlier week, I found it almost impossible to do this and support discussion at depth. It was unfortunate when the technology broke down at your end Clare. We did continue but I experienced a strong sense of wanting the Chair to intervene at what seemed a crucial moment in the discussion.		
Was it worth the candle? Not sure - didn't feel we had enough time to get to grips with the real issues in enough depth. For me, the technology just got in the way. In a teaching context, I'd have been worried about the depth of understanding that had been achieved. I'd much rather have had a f2f meeting and this was a long way off 2nd best. I think we might have been better sticking to asynchronous discussion, with deadlines for posting of messages in threads, to impose a time frame. Was it worth the candle? Definitely, yes. Thanks to your hard work we have a role-playing model that can be used by others and a valuable range of e-assessment web resources underpinning the session. Reflecting	Overall: the simulation tutorial	

on the tutorial as a whole, I think I gained more in terms of depth of understanding from the asynchronous pre-tutorial messages than the quick-fire out of synch comments in the online tutorial. I liked Kerry s point about critical thinking and critical articulation. I did a lot of critical thinking during the session even though I did not always manage to articulate this. I missed the boat a number of times (typing text then realising things had moved on so deleting rather than sending very frustrating). I came away from this session feeling I had had a mental workout. I agree the facilitator s role is very demanding, but I also think the participant s role is challenging too. I'd like to start by saying how interesting I found the tutorial on Tuesday. I thought Clare's preparation was exemplary, and the simulation was imaginative and well worth trying. I've used Clare's headings to respond to specific points. I appreciated it Clare and enjoyed the experience.		
Kerry's question about what an on-line tutorial is for is important to our evaluation. At the moment, I lean towards the suggestion that asynchronous discussion with a deadline offers just as much. Despite our increasing familiarity with the technology, I've not warmed to it as a medium for tutorials. Perhaps when we have voice-activtated whiteboards, I'll change my mind. I've learned more about synchronous tutorials. I suspect that Clare's comment about not getting to grips with the real issues at any depth holds good for all of us. I'm not sure how much difference more time would make. I think there's something about the length of comment you can include and the speed with which you have to post that is inherently detrimental to academic discussion. The pressure is on to post short comments. By the time you are ready or invited to elaborate, the discussion has moved on and your previous comments are off the page. In a face to face session, you can say, "I'd just like to return to....for a moment." Is there an equivalent convention on-line? I tend to think synchronous discussion is more useful for group activities with a specific, limited purpose. These might include generating initial ideas, discussing a document or diagram, or reaching consensus about something already prepared. You could, of course, do any of these asynchronously, just using email.	Overall: all the tutorials	

As for using it in staff development, I have my doubts, but do have one particular group who would find the experience invaluable if you'd like to set something up, Kerry.

I do think there is some mileage in offering staff the experience of participating in an online tutorial as a means of learning about the learning technologies. I enjoyed the Collaborate initiative run by Sheffield University some years ago. They offered practical experiences of working online for staff developers that used asynchronous discussion. I think the synchronous tutorial could be used as an incentive to staff to commit to being co-present in time and space without the need to be physically present. But I do have major concerns about the lead in time needed to ensure staff have the requisite software and basic IT skills necessary to engage. Our backgrounds and experiences in working with and enthusing about learning technologies must put us at a distinct advantage and yet we have not found getting to grips with the Virtual Classroom technology that easy.

The online tutorial experience has been fascinating, frustrating and fun. I have learnt a good deal in the process thanks to all.