

Using Guests in the Virtual Classroom.

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Abstract

One source reports that there are over 300 VLEs in operation. With few exceptions they all seek to harness the potential power of GroupWare/electronic delivery with the opportunity to develop shared collaborative learning, whether synchronous or asynchronous, in a virtual classroom situation. But both supporters and critics do agree that if there is a potential weakness in using a Virtual Learning Environment it will be in the quality and quantity of discussion and debate that takes place in this virtual classroom. This paper draws upon experiences of using LearningSpace to deliver an off-campus programme, *Certificate in Marketing Practice*, validated by the Chartered Institute of Marketing for Sourcerer Ltd. and the SMILE Project being developed currently using an European Social Fund award.

The paper concludes with a view that learners are more likely to engage in virtual discussions, both quality and quantity, when they perceive a 'worth' in doing so. In determining this 'worth', the role of the tutor as well as choice and role of a guest in the virtual classroom is critical. A guest should be more than a novelty factor. Some learners will see taking part in virtual classroom activities as worthwhile where such activity is linked to either summative and/or formative assessment. Linking activities can guarantee an higher participation rate, but measuring that involvement (for example in terms of quantifying individual or group contributions to threaded discussions for assessment purposes) in itself raises some major methodological issues. Moreover, this carrot-and-stick approach can't be relied upon to work in every situation. There will be modules where this linking is neither possible (there may no formal credit-bearing assessment as such) nor practical in learning terms. Ideally the learner should see the worth in the effort of taking part in virtual classroom activities in terms of these activities enriching their own learning experiences. It is the facility to engage in active collaborative learning in the virtual classroom which has moved VLEs and distributed learning beyond the (now) more traditional distance learning methods. It is up to module designers to release this opportunity. The well-conceived use of guests in the virtual classroom may be one such way.

Keywords

e-learning; virtual classroom; tutors; virtual guests

Introduction

One informed source reports that there are over 300 Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in operation¹. With few exceptions they all seek to harness the potential power of GroupWare/electronic delivery with the opportunity to develop shared collaborative learning, whether synchronous or asynchronous, in a virtual classroom situation. But both supporters and critics do agree that if there is a potential weakness in using a VLE it will be in the quality and quantity of discussion and debate that takes place in this virtual classroom. As one writer has observed "one third contribute, one third only read messages and one third never access" (Salmon, 2001). Our own experiences suggest it is difficult to over-generalise contributions (indeed how to realistically measure the quality as well as quantity), but find that tutor expectations are invariably never realised. Why

does it seem that learners are so reluctant to use virtual classrooms? Researchers have suggested a legion of answers, but they tend to suggest the role of the tutor and the learner's willingness and ability are among the most critical (Marchmont Observatory, 2000).

VLEs been used at Staffordshire University to support both undergraduate and postgraduate full time programmes since 1998 (Clements & Smalley, 2000). Currently there are over 7000 student users of Lotus LearningSpace within the University framework, with planned expansion to move to 12000 by 2002. This paper draws upon experiences of using LearningSpace to deliver an off-campus programme, *Certificate in Marketing Practice*, validated by the Chartered Institute of Marketing for Sourcerer Ltd². and the SMILE Project being developed currently using an European Social Fund award³.

The Tutor's key role as Motivator

Before considering the introduction of guests into the virtual classroom, into virtual activities, it is critical that attention is focussed first upon the tutor's vital role. Some researchers suggest that tutor will play the key role in the success of discussions in the virtual classroom. Some believe that "(the tutor) has a marked effect on the discourse even when low-key" (Hartley & Collins-Brown, 1999). Others see the role as all embracing: "the tutor must be involved as facilitator, encourager, structure provider and resource" (Warren & Rada, 1998). Most agree that a tutor needs to be trained with specific competencies to carry out his role (Salmon, 2001). At Staffordshire University all tutors involved in the design and delivery of e-learning modules using VLEs are required to undergo in-house training and workshops concerned with pedagogy as well as hands-on exposure of the particular VLE platform(s) to be used. This takes place under the watchful eye of the University's designated unit, the Learning Development Centre⁴. Further support is provided by the University's own tutor-help module available on-line as well as a similar customised provision available to all registered learners.

Besides their own competencies, the tutor has to be prepared and able to train the learner to be able to 'learn to learn' in the virtual classroom too. Salmon suggests it is vital that the tutor begins this with the learner's first exposure to virtual learning environments as a precursor for providing the kinds of skills and learner expectations needed to effectively later use the virtual classroom (Salmon, 2001). This preparation is, in fact, two sided. Just as the learner 'learns' to work in the virtual classroom, so the tutor 'learns' about the learners just as he would in the traditional classroom. Such experience will identify apparent strengths and weaknesses in both handling the technology as well as the underpinning pedagogy.

Some of the apparent inactivity by learners in virtual classrooms appears to be down to learner motivation, a perception that the taking part is not worthwhile. Researchers tend to support the view that effective learning can not take place without motivation. Of the five factors that Gilliver et al (1998) identified which they believed were potential motivators for students working in virtual learning environments all relied to a certain extent upon the tutor's effectiveness as a motivator. Their factors were:

- The presence of motivating tutors
- Learning being active, where the student is able to make a choice as to pace and content
- Curiosity and self discovery
- Collaborative learning
- Opportunity for responsive feedback and individual involvement

Knowles' (1980) work suggests that the nature of adult learning (*andragogy*) changes as an individual matures. He suggests that adults no longer feel dependent personalities, but have the desire to become self-directing. He contends that the motivation (to learn) is internally, much less externally, generated. But in practice many learners may be returning to formal learning after some period away and so some form of help is required to kick-start that internal motivation suggested by Knowles. It is quite possible that a number of the learners come from a teaching culture where the 'teacher was king', the 'sage on the stage' and will feel uncomfortable with the lack of face-to-face contact. We have found in virtual classroom in both on-campus and off-campus courses, numbers of the participants seem reluctant to 'speak until spoken to'. The introduction of guests can actually exacerbate this situation, as will be discussed later.

Choosing a Guest

Effective tutors need not provide the only credible and motivational force in the virtual classroom. They have the opportunity to extend their role by introducing 'guests'. Just as some meritorious visiting professor might provide added value in the traditional environment, so the same opportunity has been observed to be effective when working in virtual learning environments. Chosen carefully, the involvement of guests can enhance the standing of the discussions, debates and the value of the module as a whole (Mifflin & Price, 2001). The decision to include a 'guest' in the learning & teaching strategy requires a purpose, one which can, at the appropriate time, be conveyed to all the parties concerned, learners and guest. The tutor no longer faces time and place constraints. There may be monetary considerations, but the choice is almost limitless. The location of said guests becomes irrelevant as long as access to the technology is available. Furthermore the debate is not limited to the time the guest might otherwise have only been available to the face-to-face audience. With mutual agreement the discussion may be continued for some time, thereby allowing the learner to have reflected before asking, or perhaps following up on a threaded discussion. This might equally apply where there has been a guest face-to-face presentation, but where the learning impact can be extended by recourse to using the virtual environment.

We have involved a number of different types of guests to contribute to modules. The first, and probably most accessible to the tutor, is a fellow guest (academic). The use of VLEs means that it is no longer necessary for a module to be tied to a specific number of tutors. Problems of inaccessible but expert staff due to rigid timetabling commitments is no longer an issue. Guest tutors enter and leave the module as and when required. Besides contributing on content, it allows the bridging of modules.

An alternative is to include an external expert as guest. There may be the cases where the staff do not have the required specialist knowledge required for part of the module. This can be increasingly the case where there are practices and skills specific to one (business) sector, such as 'public sector accounting'. In the future this will allow much greater opportunities to module designers and tutors who will no longer be constrained by the skills and experiences of the on-campus staff. These experts can work from home or office and yet be an integral part of the student's learning experience. From our point of view we identify a third, discrete group of potential 'guests', namely in-company personnel. Increasingly in-company programmes expect to reflect a substantial self-input. Rather than resist this growing phenomenon, we have found involving in-company guests a significant way of enriching the programme, adding to the learner's credibility as well as engendering internal company support too for the module. Involvement in work-based

problems, in particular, take on a much more focussed direction. In our opinion we see this as an essential and critical part of the module design for all future in-company programmes. We believe that selection of suitable guests by the learners themselves would further enrich their perceived legitimacy and contribute to a significant shift towards student-centered learning.

Why the virtual classroom?

We consider the virtual classroom the most appropriate tool for introducing guests, rather than chat rooms or bulletin boards (Clements, 2001). It is where the tutor has the opportunity to guide and direct learning, in line with his learning and teaching strategy; it supports the view that learners require some structure and support to work confidently in a virtual learning environment (Thomas & Carswell, 2000). As far as practical the communications here need purpose, and to make it effective that purpose requires being communicated to the learners. Where the learners cannot distinguish between (idle) chat and purposeful chat, the impact of virtual delivery is diminished. Furthermore it cannot be assumed that all learners will necessarily take part in Chat Room discussions or post messages on Bulletin Boards. Indeed the opposite is often the case - "Students conducted no voluntary discussions of any significance in relation to the academic content of the module...it (Bulletin Board) became an alternative method for disseminating information" (Ramsay, 2000). Similarly, Sadler & Hatzipanagos, (2001) concluded - "(the Bulletin Board) has not been as effective as had been hoped".

Determining the Guest's Role and Contribution

What a guest can and should contribute will be a function of their expertise and experience, their availability synchronously or asynchronously, their willingness to participate in 'honest debate' under the guidance of the tutor. More specifically this will involve whether the guest is expected to initiate or follow discussion threads, provide initial or supplementary materials or not.

Figure 1 is an example taken from the *Certificate in Marketing Practice*. First the course members first received face-to-face instruction on the concept of 'marketing orientation'.

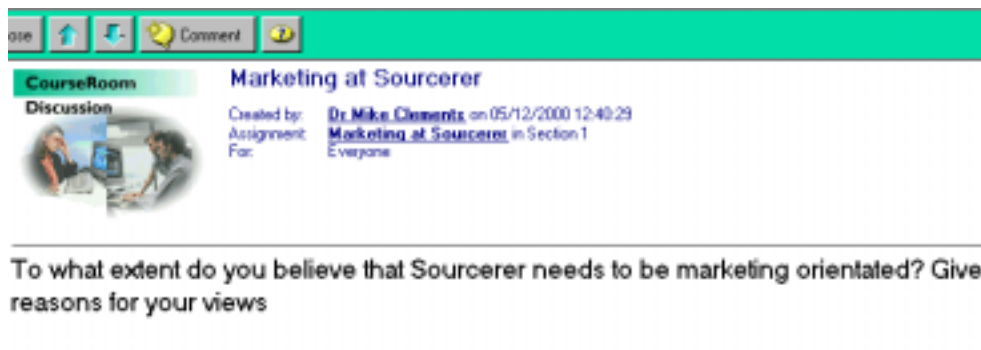


Figure 1 Guest Discussion in the CourseRoom

Additional materials accessible through LearningSpace supported the lecture. They were then asked to consider what they had learnt in terms of how this concept impacted upon their own roles in the company as well as a more company-wide perspective. They were invited to seek the views of other managers and access a range of published materials.

Subsequently they were invited to discuss the following question in the CourseRoom (the virtual classroom in LearningSpace). Their responses were sort but there were no prescribed penalties non-participation, though they had been made aware at the beginning of the module at a later stage there was a virtual activity that would form part of the module assessment strategy. After some time (approximately one week) a senior manager with a marketing responsibility was invited to view the comments to date and join in the discussion. He was asked to pick up on some of the recurring points and provide not necessarily a 'company response' but to engage in meaningful discussion with the course members. At first the discussion appeared to slow as the course members became aware that a senior manager was accessing what they had contributed, even though they had been made aware that such an event was planned to happen⁵. For many, if not all of these personnel, this was probably the first time they would have had such an opportunity to discuss such matters with this level of management. But it was encouraging to note that the course members ceased to be over-awed (if they had been at the outset) quickly. In some of the trials we have noticed an interesting (virtual) role-playing issue, where some learners' contributions appeared to be made to impress the guest. We do not have enough evidence, as yet, to form a clear opinion, but we signal the issue here is this paper as a possible manifestation of Mayo's 'Hawthorne Effect' (Mayo, 1998). Whilst it may certainly increase the activity in the virtual classroom, it may not necessarily contribute to the intended learning outcomes. This does open up an important role for the tutor when nominating guests if such an effect is prevalent. There is the need to comprehend the legitimacy for doing so, through the understanding of the relationships between all three parties concerned – tutor, learners and guest, especially in the choice of senior or other in-company personnel.

The Tutor's Interventionist Role

Educationalist views reflect generally the belief that the tutor's role is to more to assist the student's approach to (self)learning than to impart knowledge to the learner per se (Shepard, 1991), Schuell, 1992, Gilliver et al, 1998). Ramsden (1992), Entwistle (1997) amongst others refer to this approach as "deep learning" (as an alternative to "shallow learning"), where the tutor encourages the learner to relate and apply previous knowledge and experience (including that provided by the tutor) to new contexts. The tutor facilitate the learner in identifying and making the links between different aspects of their understanding of the subject matter. As part of that facilitation should be the role the tutor decides to play in the discussions where guests have been invited to participate. From the learner's perspective there might be a fine line between facilitating and interventionism, when the aim is to engender a culture of self-learning. "(There is) the need to move away from the 'sage on the stage' approach to cater for more proactively for the needs of the adult learner" (Marchmont Observatory Workshop, 2000) There are two issues to consider. The first is the content contribution the tutor might wish to make to the discussion, the second is how the discussion itself will be managed and controlled. Tutor failure to manage a virtual discussion or tutor cynicism undermines the responsiveness of the learners. The learners have to have confidence in the tutor as well as the technology. The tutor has to have convinced the learners of the value that can/will be derived from working in the virtual classroom (Lindberg & Greene, 2001). In part the structure and design of the module might require more leading/instructional intervention by the tutor. At the outset the tutor should decide what role the guest will play, in particular how

proactive will the guest's role be in discussions? The tutor may decide that the guest should initiate discussion, following some presentation (which could be face-to-face, videoconference or virtual) by the guest. The learners then having the opportunity to question the guest on where he stands with regard to a particular issue (possibly the guest is noted for a particular stance). More challenging is the opportunity for the guest and learners to engage in threaded discussions, each probing the other's points-of-view/conclusions. The tutor may choose to seed the discussion on behalf of the guest, but then continue to play only a background, mediating role (where necessary). Evidence to date suggests that without some interventionist role by the tutor, virtual discussions simply do not happen in the same way as they might in the traditional classroom/tutorial situation. From our own experiences, where the tutor elects to 'seed' the discussions, then the discussions appear more effective, certainly at undergraduate level, but similar signs are appearing with in-company courses too. This seeding can take a number of forms. It can be that the tutor introduces the theme for the discussion: "I have talked about this, now I want you (or better "us") to consider the following points...." It may come at a later stage if the discussion seems to be running out of steam, yet where the tutor considers the learning outcomes have not yet been achieved. The tutor by introducing some other points for the learners to consider (or perhaps taking a point raised by one respondent and asking the others to consider it etc) can rekindle the discussion's momentum. The tutor's contribution might take a more directive form. A deadline might be imposed for responses, possibly with sanctions for non-conformance. Alternative approaches involve the nomination of a 'lead responder', or someone who is responsible for determining the initial topic to be discussed within an agreed framework, or someone responsible for synthesising and concluding on the discussion. From our experiences to-date, in-company personnel appear to require less persuasion to take part once their initial technophobe concerns have been overcome⁶ given that they can perceive the value of doing so; the tutor's role in achieving that 'credibility' remains a critical factor.

Facilitating Access, Inducting and Briefing the Guest

Just as lecture planning is critical generally, so preparing the groundwork for the guest increases their effectiveness. Most web-based VLEs allow some form of guest access, though generally this access is user name – password protected. It is as well, especially where the guest has not taken part in virtual discussions (which are more multi-dimensional than say emails) to consider preparing them for it. Just as some of the learners can be found to be more reluctant to engage in electronic discussion, so the guest may have some initial misgivings that can be cleared up before going 'live'. We set out to prepare the guest in terms of providing an indication of what is likely to happen through a brief induction period, but more importantly at this early stage, allowing them access to the module in advance of their actual participation. In this way they can begin to get a feel for how the learners are approaching the module in general and the virtual classroom in particular. It may not be necessary to communicate the learning objectives of the module but just as in the learners' case the guest needs to be convinced as to the worth of the role they are about to undertake. In part this is likely to include a reassurance that the medium will not expose them to possible technical inadequacies. It may involve some introduction to 'netiquette', where the 'rules of engagement' are communicated to all parties. Just as inappropriate language needs to be avoided, so does the imposition of status by one party over another. Whether the guest is known or not known to the virtual community, where the VLE allows, the guest's CV should be made available for the

virtual community. Besides building a level of excitement in the module, it maintains the sense of building a learning community; in LearningSpace this would be the Profile database. The guest must be made 'comfortable' with both the technology and sympathetic with the pedagogy.

Widening the Guest's Role and Contribution

Our early attempts at introducing 'guests' has been promising in terms of the activity noted in the virtual classroom. Because these are in-company personnel involved in work-based problems, with some identifiable career goals derived from participation, possibly that level of participation is higher than might occur on say an undergraduate programme. This is in line with evidence provided elsewhere when doctoral students engaged in significant virtual classroom activity (Stoy, 2001). We believe that the tutor's role is critical in making the virtual classroom work effectively. The nature of his 'electronic presence' will play a critical role in winning over the hearts and minds of the learners, particularly where these learners require greater help and motivation to learn, including his prudent choice of guests. We believe that we have only begun to scratch the surface in what might be achieved by the use of guests in the virtual classroom. The introduction of the informed guest offers the opportunity to do something new in a learning & teaching strategy. They can be chosen for their relevance to the module's learning objectives by adding further scope for developing work-based/problem-based opportunities.

Besides the introduction of guests to participate in virtual discussions, we are considering the opportunities to use them in the assessment process as well as the quality monitoring issues. As part of the accreditation process agreed with the Chartered Institute of Marketing, Institute personnel have access to the modules, to observe the process; they have not, as yet, taken part in discussions, but there is no reason why that situation should not change if the tutor believes their contribution might be appropriate; there is no reason why the delegates could not be invited to question the role of the Chartered Institute of Marketing. What is critical in making virtual discussions more effective in terms of content and learner involvement is that all parties involved can clearly see the worth in doing so. Whilst the early stages may be marked by a novelty factor, long term use of this powerful collaborative tool requires having all the parties on-board.

In Summary

It has been suggested that the tutor's role in introducing guests into the virtual classroom is critical to enhance the quality and quantity of learner participation. This role can be seen as:

- Planning from Induction to create a feeling of 'worth' of guests taking part in activities such as discussions and debates in the virtual classroom
- To communicate that 'worth' to the learners

It has then been suggested that this 'worth' will be enhanced when the following conditions are in place:

- Tutor is comfortable with working in the virtual classroom, having confidence with both the technology and the pedagogy
- Tutor has the competence to initiate and respond to activities and queries arising in the virtual classroom

- There are clear learning objectives as to the role of the virtual classroom as part of the overall Learning & Teaching Strategy
- The learners have sufficient competence and faith in the virtual classroom in particular and Virtual Learning Environments in general as valued delivery modes for their learning needs
- Choosing guests can enrich an electronic module, but that choice should have a purpose
- But avoid 'over-egging the pudding'; not too many guests of the same
- Communicate that purpose to both the guest and the learners
- Identify suitable material for guest involvement
- Determine the tutor's role as support for the guest; be clear what are the intended/expected outcomes from the activity
- Brief and Induct the guest
- Ensure the guest is comfortable with the technology and sympathetic with the pedagogy
- Clearly prescribe a role for the guest – e.g. set/seed a discussion in motion; respond to learners etc
- Be clear on the tutor-guest-learner relationship in terms of how it might have unintended learning consequences
- Plan to provide feedback to both learners and guest as to the worth of the exercise
- Consider expanding the role of expert-guests in case study developments and other work-based/problem-based learning activities as part of the overall learning strategy
- Consider the introduction of guests to assist in quality and assessment issues

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End Notes

¹ <http://www.ltsn-01.ac.uk/vle/ViewData>

² <http://www.sourcerer.co.uk>

³ SMILE (SME **MI**cro-**LE**arning) is a Project being developed to delivery flexible learning to small and medium-sized enterprises using Lotus LearningSpace

⁴ <http://www.staffs.ac.uk/lde>

⁵ We had considered inviting the guest into the discussion unannounced but rejected the idea for the time being. We felt, the alternative, to introduce a guest without the prior knowledge of learners, especially where that guest may be perceived to have some impact upon the learner's career in the company, might be less productive in establishing the virtual classroom in this and subsequent modules.

⁶ Such issues need to be addressed long before this stage of the module is reached, most effectively during a structured induction/hands-on session.