

FACILITATING LEARNING WITH WEB CONFERENCING

Recommendations based on Learners' Experiences

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Abstract: This paper reports some of the findings from a study undertaken to obtain an insight into the experiences of learners engaging with web conferencing. A small group of work-based adult learners with substantial experience of learning in a virtual classroom provided accounts of and reflections on their experiences using a blog and group interview. Qualitative analysis of data led to findings which support some existing best practice guidelines for facilitators and also provide additional insight into issues that impact on learners' experiences. This paper presents our emerging recommendations for facilitators and explores some of the issues raised by learners including the effective use of breakout rooms, the management of minimalist learners and the need to respect learners' privacy. A facilitation approach which allows learners to develop autonomy and exert control in the virtual classroom and which acknowledges diversity of learning preferences is suggested. Whilst the recommendations made may not be appropriate in all learning contexts, they are presented as a starting point to help other facilitators review and develop their own practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching with web conferencing raises many challenges for facilitators. Ng (2007), for example, notes that working with synchronous technology can be demanding and stressful for tutors and it has been observed that in some contexts teachers do not make full use of the interactive features available and rely on teacher-led strategies (Murphy et al., 2011). These challenges might be, in part, due to the fact that many facilitators have limited experience as learners in virtual classrooms, and this may make it difficult for them to appreciate what the experience is like for their own learners. The possibility of a 'duality' of experience exists: learners and facilitator can be engaged in different activities and there may be no connection or communication between them. For example, if learners are asked to view a video clip for discussion, the facilitator cannot easily tell whether learners are annoyed or confused by the content, enjoying it, having technical problems, or indeed checking their email or engaged in an alternative activity. Some of the important clues that would indicate in a face-to-face context how a session is going, and how participants are responding, are unavailable to a facilitator. Despite the use of web cams and other media, or software

tools such as emoticons, facilitators may feel at times they are 'teaching to a wall' or talking 'into the ether' (Cornelius, 2011).

A range of helpful guidelines are available to encourage facilitators to use tools appropriately and promote interaction and engagement (e.g. Chatterton, 2010; Sampson and Shepherd, 2010; Shepherd, Green and Sampson, 2011), but these often focus on appropriate use of the tools, and rarely make clear the evidence behind their recommendations. There is a need for further research into practice with web conferencing, together with appropriate models and pedagogic strategies (Wang and Hsu, 2008; de Freitas and Neumann, 2009).

There is clear need to share and promote good practices to support online teachers (Ng, 2007), and as the number and diversity of web conferencing users increases, there are opportunities to gather empirical evidence to help evaluate what constitutes effective practice in different contexts. We hope the study reported here will contribute to an emerging body of evidence on learners' and facilitators' experiences of web conferencing. It focuses on the experiences of a small number of work-based adult learners to try to illuminate some of the 'blind spots' which challenge virtual classroom facilitators.

2 THE CONTEXT

Web conferencing sessions have been an integral part of the online version of the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE) programme at the University of Aberdeen since 2009. Six cohorts of learners (over 60 in total) have completed the programme using an approach which blends the use of online activities delivered via a virtual learning environment, tutor led workshops in Elluminate, and student-led collaborative investigations. Learners on the programme are all in-service lecturers from Scottish Further Education colleges. They are geographically dispersed, represent a variety of professional and vocational subject areas, have diverse academic backgrounds and varying levels of IT confidence and expertise. Following a face-to-face induction session, web conferencing is accessed by participants from their home or work location and used throughout the programme to provide a variety of learning experiences including:

- Workshops. Regular sessions involving up to 12 learners including tutor led activities such as icebreakers, individual activities, large and small group discussions, short presentations and student-led activities such as poster 'presentations'. They include frequent opportunities for interaction using audio, text, whiteboard tools, emoticons and polling tools. During workshops web conferencing may be combined with the use of external resources including web sites, YouTube videos and documents.
- Tutorials. These are shorter sessions which focus on assignment tasks and include tutor led activities and discussions with smaller groups on assignment related study skills.
- Open office sessions. Tutors make themselves available for consultation by individual learners during virtual office hours. Where these sessions address assignment related issues file sharing is a commonly used tool.
- Student-led meetings. Learners are required to work collaboratively to investigate problems and issues relevant to their professional practice and groups are encouraged to use web conferencing to facilitate teamwork between geographically dispersed group members. Some groups use web conferencing on a regular basis, to facilitate interaction, whilst others find alternative ways of collaborating.

A learner who completes the online TQFE will have completed more than 40 hours of study time using

web conferencing. Thus they can be regarded as experienced users, who have developed a high level of familiarity and confidence with web conferencing software. Seven tutors have been involved in the design and delivery of online session, with new tutors working alongside a more experienced colleague for a time to help them develop their facilitation skills. All tutors are highly experienced facilitators across a range of educational sectors and settings.

3 THE RESEARCH

Participants on the online TQFE are regularly asked to provide feedback on their experiences of the programme and the delivery approach. Feedback from the first cohort of online learners led to changes to the structure and presentation of sessions and activities, for example the inclusion of more frequent shorter breaks during workshops, and revisions to the approach to using icebreaker activities. However, despite helpful feedback from learners, facilitators indicated that they were still unsure exactly what it was like to be a participant in the virtual classroom sessions. At the same time they acknowledged that it was important to be able to appreciate and understand learners' experiences to facilitate the development of appropriate, engaging and effective activities for their online sessions.

The aim of this research was try to gain a better understanding of learners' experiences in the TQFE virtual classrooms. Two methods of obtaining detailed accounts of learners' experiences were used. The first was an open access blog to which learners posted comments on various aspects of their experiences. The blog was introduced at an online 'project launch' event and all TQFE participants who had completed the programme were invited to contribute in an email. Facilitators posted blog entries on various aspects of the programme (for example ice breakers, the use of breakout rooms, discussions), raising questions to prompt learners to reflect on and share their experiences. Eight 'starter postings' were made by tutors between February and May 2011 and 21 comments were received from 6 learners.

Blog postings were reviewed by the researchers to identify questions and issues for further discussion in a semi-structured group interview. All blog contributors were invited to the interview, and three attended. A brief summary of the blog postings was presented to open the discussion, but participants were allowed to take the conversation in

any direction they wished and raise additional topics. The interview provided rich detail of the participants' experiences and indicates areas of common and diverse experiences.

The blog postings and interview transcript were analysed iteratively by the two researchers to identify emerging themes and illustrative quotations. Themes were sorted and classified to provide the recommendations and sub-recommendations, each supported by appropriate quotations from learners.

4 FINDINGS

The recommendations cover areas of practice which are commonly included in other best practice guidelines, such as preparing learners and using breakout rooms effectively (see table 1 – for a full version including sub-recommendations please visit www.slideshare.com/sarahcornelius). The learner perspective on these issues adds weight to existing recommendations and provides additional evidence of what works and why from the participants' points of view. Other recommendations cover areas that were raised by learners, such as the impact of minimalists and concerns over privacy, and are issues not generally covered in other guidelines for good practice. This section will focus on three specific areas of the recommendations – breakout rooms, minimalists and privacy - to illustrate how the learners' voice has been used to inform their development and to add depth and richness to the recommendations.

Table 1: The nine areas of recommendations for facilitating learning using web conferencing based on learners' experiences.

1. Prepare learners for learning in the virtual classroom
2. Establish etiquette and adopt a set of protocols to facilitate communication
3. Use icebreakers to welcome and familiarise learners with tools
4. Use breakout rooms for small group activities
5. Provide a variety of activities to meet different learning preferences
6. Foster student-tutor and student-student relationships throughout a course
7. Identify and manage those who participate minimally
8. Use the media to suit the situation – video, audio and chat can be used separately or in combination
9. Reassure, encourage, keep things simple

4.1 Using Breakout Rooms

Breakout rooms can be an enormously helpful way of varying an online session and are considered by

Chatterton (2010) to offer “immense versatility” (p. 13), for example allowing small groups to undertake tasks and bring outputs back to a plenary full group discussion. The use of breakout rooms was generally very well received by the TQFE respondents. One blogger suggested that “*breakout rooms worked well and were easy to move in and out of*”. Another noted that “*the breakout rooms are an excellent tool...when we log on initially, we get a small idea of what is to come by seeing the breakout rooms and what they are called – builds the anticipation*”. An interviewee added, “*I do look at the breakout rooms and see what they are named and what they are, and if it’s something like ‘red’ ‘blue’ and ‘gold’, I wonder what that is.*” Thus, if a facilitator allocates interesting breakout room names relevant to group tasks, some learners will notice and may be motivated to engage as a result.

Learners were of the opinion that an optimum number for activities in breakout rooms is 3 or 4. The facilitator normally decided how to allocate learners to breakout rooms, for example on the basis of interest, skills, or order in the participant list, or may do this randomly. One blogger said, “*I don’t mind how we divide up to go into a room – whether we are asked to go to a particular room specifically or it is chosen randomly. Saying that, I hope you never use the ‘team captains taking turns to choose who they want in a group’ as happened in school as that would dredge up memories of gym class!*” One strategy that was not used by facilitators was allowing the software to randomly allocate and move participants to breakout rooms. One interviewee commented that “*it gives participants autonomy [to move themselves into breakout rooms] as well, to know that you can do that yourself, instead of someone taking you*”, a comment which supports the rejection of the automatic allocation approach and suggests that giving learners control over their movement around the environment is more appropriate. One blogger found it easy to get into breakout rooms, but challenging if all the participants in a session tried to move around at once: “*I do find that when everyone jumps into a room, my name on the list moves too rapidly for me to quickly drag so I sometimes wait until the rush is over and then drag my name into the room*”. Care also needs to be taken to ensure that allocation to breakout rooms does not leave anyone on their own - one blogger talked about feeling “*lonely*” when no-one else joined her in a room.

One of the tutors raised this issue of visiting breakout rooms where learners were working on group tasks: “*I just wondered how you felt about the*

way we were facilitating when you were in breakout rooms. Certainly with my groups, sometimes I would pop in and sometimes I wouldn't ... I was never sure if anyone had noticed me or not". This tutor clearly had concerns about whether or not to visit the rooms, whether learners' privacy should be respected and discussions allowed to continue unobserved and uninterrupted. Interviewees seemed to have been generally unaware of the tutor's presence when they did 'drop in' to breakout rooms – "I didn't notice unless someone said something". Others did notice, but saw it as a neutral activity, "I found I was aware of tutors entering but didn't feel the need to interrupt the flow of discussion to acknowledge their presence", or, "I do tend to notice when the tutor pops in and don't mind at all". Some learners may see the availability of tutors in breakout rooms as an opportunity to clarify issues or ask supplementary questions. Bloggers said, "sometimes it can be easier to ask a question when in a breakout room", and "it gives an opportunity to ask questions when the tutor 'pops in' if anyone is nervous about that kind of thing". Learners may therefore value strategies which allow them to invite facilitators into their discussion space - "we did on occasions request the tutor to come in" – whilst being ambivalent about the issue of unannounced visits.

All in all, breakout rooms provide a safe and confidential space for small groups to work together and discuss ideas. A blogger put it, "they are great when used to collaborate and then return with feedback for the group".

Shepherd, Green and Sampson (2011) make the suggestion that facilitators should "drop in regularly to each room to provide guidance" and notes that when directed to breakout rooms participants "often wait for the facilitator to show up or reissue instructions or manage the tools for them" (p. 45). This may be the case for one-off webinars where participants are new to each other, but where a sustained programme of study is supported using web conferencing, the development of independence in learners may be an important aim to prevent such over-reliance on facilitator guidance.

Learners noted the value of the timer tool during breakout room activities. Bloggers said, "timers were a very good tool for ensuring we kept to time", and, "with the timer on you could still see when you were expected to be back in the main room". Allowing learners to manage their time through use of the timer, along with providing the opportunity for them to move themselves around breakout rooms, may provide learners with a sense of

responsibility and autonomy and in turn a sense of control and comfort in the virtual classroom environment.

4.2 The Impact of Minimalist Learners

Inevitably in any group of learners there will be some whose participation is minimal. A variety of behaviours may be exhibited by these minimalists, including non-attendance or lack of contribution and engagement when present. Online, this can cause difficulties for the group as a whole. One interviewee labelled such non-participation "annoying", while another explained, "In our group there were some people, like me, who were quite happy to talk all the time, but there were others who weren't and that was very, very obvious, they didn't seem to want to participate". One interviewee pointed out that in a face-to-face situation, there is more opportunity for the tutor to see what is happening, and to intervene. Online this is not so easy. Identification of minimalists may be difficult, and sensitivity is required to handle the issue when there may be difficulties understanding the reasons for the behaviour and a lack of opportunity for informal conversation to address the situation.

In collaborative work online, it can become even more problematic when a group member fails to participate or is less committed than others. Interviewees spoke of the "stress" created by this situation, which they were perhaps reluctant to share with the tutor – "It creates a level of stress that possibly you guys [tutors] aren't aware of". One interviewee regarded coping with a minimalist peer in their group as being the most stressful part of the whole programme. Suggestions for facilitators are difficult to make, although careful design of activities and close monitoring of breakout group activity may help to identify minimalists and discourage disengagement.

A related issue concerns the use of supporting technologies alongside web conferencing. For example a tutor may provide support between live online sessions using tools such as blogs or discussion groups. Again, these may be used well by some learners, but not at all by others. It may be that such aids do not in fact aid learning for some people. However, in a group situation, it will be noticed that some learners fail to participate, and this engenders negative feelings in others – "I was quite disappointed with the amount of people who did actually input to the blog". One interviewee felt that it was too easy to opt out, another was more willing to make allowances, saying that time

pressure of other aspects of work was a factor, while yet another interviewee spoke of initial enthusiasm in using the blog provided, and then becoming discouraged by the lack of peer response – *“I have to confess then I fell away from it because I wasn’t getting responses”*. This demotivation can be detrimental to the group as a whole, and to the success of the online course, and should also be closely monitored by the tutor.

Little discussion of minimalists is found in any existing best practice guidelines, although Chatterton (2010) notes that challenges can also be created by participants who dominate or side-track discussions towards topics of their personal interest. He suggests that sending appropriate private text messages may be a useful strategy to address the situation, and this might also be a useful strategy for addressing minimalists.

4.3 Respecting Diversity

Tutors readily acknowledge the diversity of learners in a TQFE group and one commented on the difficulty in accommodating differences – *“It’s interesting ... the diversity of thinking styles in any group... you’ve got divergent thinkers and convergent thinkers... we’ve got people who are happy to discuss and to look at ideas and to spend time talking about ideas in a more divergent way. And other people that want to be focused, to know what they’ve got to do to pass [the course] and they find it infuriating if it’s too waffly and too discursive. So trying to accommodate these different types of thinking styles is difficult.”* One interviewee, clearly a divergent and creative thinker, responded by saying that *“I...like to go off at a tangent. To me it’s not waffling, but that’s just the way my mind works. It is sort of creative like that”*. A blogger expressed a preference to be well prepared for activities: *“I would have preferred to review [any external resources] before coming to class. I felt at times there was not enough time to digest them or reflect on the questions posed before being asked to respond (and being first alphabetically, I was more often than not the first one asked). My answers would have been a bit more coherent and structured if I had more time”*. Expressing an alternative view, another blogger wrote, *“I like the surprise of using external resources during the session... sometimes an unprepared response to an activity can be more interesting (and nerve wracking at first). If I was asked to review something before hand and it was repeated in the session (e.g. a YouTube clip), I could*

see myself losing interest as I would already have seen it and I dislike repeating an activity.” For the facilitator it is clear that a range of strategies, and variety in activity design are important in a group with such diversity of learning preferences. Shepherd, Green and Sampson (2011) similarly suggest building in as much variety as possible to an online course to address learner preferences.

The quotation above also indicates the need for facilitators to be sensitive to individual’s feelings – the blogger talked about a situation that she found *“nerve wracking”*. At least two bloggers wrote about their dislike for being *“put on the spot”* by questions from the facilitator, in one case saying that *“my mind goes blank!”*, while the other experienced embarrassment and momentary lack of articulation – *“I must have sounded like the King’s Speech”*, referring to the 2010 film of the same name. Whilst it is acknowledged that interaction needs to be encouraged on a regular basis in a virtual classroom, it is clear that facilitators need to adopt strategies that do not embarrass participants or cause them discomfort. In addition facilitators need to be aware that what they might regard as an innocuous question, perhaps as part of an icebreaking activity, may impose on the privacy of a learner in an unintended way. One blogger explained, *“I didn’t like giving out personal information in a public forum e.g. what I did in my holidays”*, and as a result, *“I felt under pressure to join in and if anything [this] turned me off in terms of participation”*. Shepherd, Green and Sampson (2011) also note the need to be sensitive to cultural differences. Due regard for learners’ privacy and comfort is therefore important to maintain motivation and participation.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This research is based on the experiences of a small number of learners, albeit a group with considerable experience as learners in a virtual classroom. Findings may not be able to be generalised to all contexts and, in addition, it is acknowledged that the perspectives of all learners from the TQFE programme are not represented here. Most significantly, the experiences of the minimalists are not considered, and there could therefore be explanations for their behaviour and patterns of interaction that have not been considered. However, the learners’ experiences presented do, in some cases, add weight to other recommendations for good practice with web conferencing made by other

authors. In other cases, they provide an alternative perspective and additional insight for facilitators.

Although an attempt has been made to summarise the data obtained into a set of guidelines for facilitators, it may not be possible to produce a 'one size fits all' set of recommendations for facilitators, and there may be differences between what constitutes good practice in one situation (e.g. the one-off webinar with drop-in participants) and others (such as the longer term use of regular online sessions with a fixed group of learners). However, in all cases elements which might be regarded as good educational practice in any environment will persist and are suggested by the findings. These include the need to facilitate with sensitivity to learners' needs, preferences, feelings and privacy, and with the aim of developing learner autonomy and independence, both with the technology that provides the learning environment, and as learners in a more general sense.

Additional research into learners' and facilitators' experiences with web conferencing is needed to help develop best practice further in this area. Our research into both facilitators' and learners' experiences continues and we hope to contribute further to the development of good practice in teaching and learning in virtual classrooms.

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