"I'm a virtual lecturer but I need real help":
Professional challenges and pedagogical opportunities
pertaining to virtuality in Higher Education

AOL (*Academics On Line*) Discussion Board

Message posted by: Dr Bloggs   (10 June 2003, 10.30am)
Title: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer!

Colleagues,
I have just been asked (or rather: told!) to deliver one of my undergraduate modules online
next year – but that's totally new to me – sending e-mails and surfing the Net is one thing, but
teaching online is another! Where/how should I start? Any idea/suggestion/recommendation?
I am a bit worried...
Thank you!

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Message posted by: Professor Hercule Poirot   (10 June 2003, 10.43am)
Title: Re: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer!

Dear Dr Bloggs,
E-teaching is a relatively young area of scholarship, but it already has its concepts, models,
gurus and key texts, as well as its conferences and areas of disputes. There is already a
plethora of good texts on the topic, from the second edition of Laurillard's seminal book
'Rethinking University Teaching' to Sloman's book on the e-learning revolution – most titles
actually seem to juggle with the same keywords (technology and/in/for education, online
teaching and learning...) and authors probably struggle to come up with original or
differentiated titles (Check Stephenson's 'Teaching and Learning Online', Jolliffe's 'Online
Learning Handbook', and Murphy's 'Online Learning and Teaching with Technology') – for
that mere reason, the most original title of Katz's 'Dancing with the Devil' deserves some
credit!
In Britain, the most commonly quoted reference is probably Gilly Salmon's work on e-
moderating – she is often mentioned for her five-step model for online asynchronous teaching,
but page 40 in her first book (called 'E-moderating') you will find a synthetic table
identifying the characteristics and competencies of good online lecturers (for some reason she
calls them e-moderators but you do not have to adopt her phraseology). Ranging from online
communications skills to content expertise, this framework is most useful and it can definitely
help you both reflect upon your current abilities and analyse your developmental needs in
order to teach online efficiently and professionally.
In a previous study, which is almost a classic reference, Mason makes the distinction of the
three responsibilities of online tutors (at social, organisational and intellectual levels) can
equally be useful in terms of staff development and PDP (personal development plan) if this
is what you need.
Like for any piece of research, dear Dr Bloggs, you need to start with a substantial literature
review to understand the theoretical underpinning of online pedagogy – as always, solid

books and strong articles are a 'passage obligé', an unavoidable pathway. The texts I have mentioned, amongst many others, offer a possible gateway, and their bibliographies can direct your further reading, depending upon the books available in your institution's library.
Yours sincerely,
Professor Hercule Poirot

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| Message posted by: | Professor Sally Brown | (10 June 2003, 9.12pm) |
| Title: | Re: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer! | |

Dear Bloggs,
I agree with Poirot that the literature on online teaching is rapidly expanding and has already provided some interesting theorising/modelisation, but please do not confine yourself to traditional sources like printed books: there are many resources available online (and *only* online) which are excellent too. Don't disregard them under the pretext that they have not been validated by the traditional double blind peer review scheme so many academics consider a professional warrant of quality and excellence. That kind of RAE-inherited attitude cannot fully apply to e-teaching which remains an emergent area of scholarship: best practice, the most useful papers and the most stimulating authors are not necessarily tied up to a few conventional journals where slow and lengthy processes would result in obsolete publications negating the principles of instant eclectronic information sharing and online knowledge creation which constitute the very basis of e-teaching. At the ITLHE (Institute of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education), we commission and publish the type of straightforward, reader-friendly, practical papers you may be looking for if you are new to e-teaching – for example we have recently added a brilliant presentation of good practice in e-teaching by Mirabelle Walker and a most useful lexicon of the language of e-teaching by John Roscoe. Those papers and many others are available to ILTHE members on the ILTHE website (one more good reason, if any, to join the ILTHE).

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| Message posted by: | Ms Jane Marple | (11 June 2003, 5.22am) |
| Title: | Re: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer! | |

Embarking on an exploratory reading on the topic of online teaching and learning is most laudable, but in my opinion you will not necessarily find the most valuable tips and ideas in articles produced by academics from other institutions who may be working with software, systems, students, courses and approaches very different from yours, from your own environment, from your own context. For online teaching, like anything else for that matter, you should start by looking around you, in your close vicinity: ask people in your own institution – you are likely to find colleagues who are either in the same situation or just one step ahead. The former ones can help you reflect upon your collective needs as a group of neophytes (for instance to have staff development workshops organised for you all); the latter ones will be worth listening to, for three reasons: firstly, you will thereby ensure that you use the same terminology as your colleagues, which otherwise could be quite confusing for your students; secondly, the problems your colleagues may have encountered and the mistakes they may have made can be valuable lessons for you; thirdly, it seems a good opportunity to meet colleagues with whom you would not normally interact, as nowadays the academic dynamics

of most institutions tend unfortunately to isolate staff rather than making them meet, talk and work together as one close intellectual community.

Ms Jane Marple
St Mary's Mead College of Higher Education

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Message posted by: Sir Max Mallowan   (11 June 2003, 7.06am)
Title: Re: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer!

Bloggs,
My two cents' worth, a lesson learnt the hard way: online teaching (be it synchronous through audio/video conferencing systems, or asynchronous like this forum and comparable discussion boards) is very different both from F2F (face-to-face) and from text-based distance education. It is a steep learning curve and it is not because you are a good classroom lecturer that you will straightaway be a good online lecturer (or e-tutor, e-facilitator or e-moderator if you prefer fancy words). What worked best for me was to join an online course as a mature student – and every single person I have spoken with, who experienced being an online student before becoming an online lecturer, praised it highly. You then really discover what it feels like to be on the receiving end – it is practical and empirical, some might say it lacks theoretical underpinning but it really worked for me– you do not need all the nice theories and models, at least not at first, they'd just confuse you or remain too abstract if you cannot relate to any hands-on practice.
Yours truly,
Sir Max Mallowan

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Message posted by: A. Hastings   (11 June 2003, 9.15am)
Title: Re: Real help needed by new virtual lecturer!

A brief contribution – I happen to have in front of me the DfES official 2002 Strategy Task Force Report called 'Get on with IT: the post-16 e-learning strategy task force report' (quite a mouthful!) – let me just copy for you their definition of e-learning (page 2): 'learning with the help of information and communication technology tools; these tools may include the internet, intranets, wireless networking, PC (personal computer) based technologies, handheld computers, interactive TV and also e-technology to support traditional delivery for example using electronic whiteboards and video-conferencing'.
Folks, don't forget that, behind all developments in HE, there is always the shadow of the government, through the DfES, through HEFCE, the QAA, the RAE...
Moving towards a learning society, comrades?!
Regards,
Arthur Hastings

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Message posted by: Dr Bloggs   (11 June 2003, 10.43am)
Title: Yes, but is it for me?

Colleagues,

Thank you very much for your contributions – most useful – of course I see how I could (easily?) learn about online teaching, but you see I am not too sure that it is for me... For at least three reasons: My subject does not seem not suitable, my IT skills are not good enough and my students do not need it anyway...

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Message posted by:	Dr Loykie Lominé	(11 June 2003, 11.59am)
Title:	Re: Yes, but is it for me?	

Dr Bloggs, your situation is most symptomatic of the three common problems with online teaching (though by no means the only ones):

- More often that not, it is not done for the right reasons, i.e. the development of online learning and teaching is not pedagogically driven but financially or politically driven.
- More often than not, tutors do not really know nor understand why they have to teach online, let alone what it will mean and imply at a practical level.
- More often than not, students are not consulted when the e-courses are being designed and developed – which is most paradoxical as the move to online learning and teaching is often presented as a tenet of student-centred pedagogy.

Yet I have to disagree with you when you justify your negativity and hesitation – what you refer to are misconceptions and myths – last year I wrote an article identifying and illustrating common myths heard from academics reluctant to discover and engage in online teaching and learning: 'Online learning and teaching is not for me because my students are very happy with the way my course runs', 'Online learning and teaching is not for me because I do not understand the jargon'... If you are interested, that paper is available online through the website of my Learning and Teaching Support Network (www.hlst.ltsn.ac.uk/johlste/index.html) but just to briefly address your three misconceptions:

(1) You believe that your subject is not suitable, but reports by academics, case studies used to share and disseminate good practice and books like Murphy's 'Online Learning and Teaching with Technology' tend to show just the opposite: all fields and subjects, from music to business and from dentistry to languages, seem to lend themselves quite well to online teaching and learning – now you did not say what your own area is, but I doubt very much that it could be totally and irreversably impervious to web-based learning and computer assisted instruction. Remember that online work can take many forms, from collaborative learning on discussion boards to research on the internet via online quizzes and numerous other activities (many of which still remain to be invented!)

(2) You argue that your IT skills are not good enough, but in my opinion the notion that online teaching requires a high level of IT literacy is a myth readily perpetuated by some tutors desirous to be admired as if they had mastered highly complex and specialised IT skills. There is a growing number of software applications created for online education – an increasing number of British institutions are buying WebCT and Blackboard, but many prefer to have their own in-house systems. Either way, the designers are well aware that their target market is not composed of IT specialists, but of tutors with understandably limited IT abilities: the programmes they produce are increasingly user-friendly and make it quite easy to set up a discussion board for students to post messages, or an online quiz to test their knowledge and

prepare for their exams. Learning to use these programmes is not more challenging than learning to use Powerpoint or Excel. It is certainly a learning curve: the first hours and the initial tasks may be comparatively difficult, but the more you practice, the easier it gets. As Powerpoint and Excel offer sophisticated functions many people are unlikely to need and master, online teaching software will contain elements beyond first-timers´ grasp, but this is not a valid excuse in the refusal to start.

(3) You think that your students do not need it anyway, but how can you be so sure? It is difficult for students to evaluate the quality and potential of any change they cannot necessarily test or imagine. Students' opinions of online learning and teaching certainly reflect the spectrum of opinion of their tutors: a progressive minority are likely to be extremely interested and willing to work with computers as much as possible, while a conservative minority will be very reluctant, almost by principle. The majority will be somewhere in the middle, concomitantly happy to give it a try (because it is different) but a bit anxious too (precisely because it is different, and also because computers often retain an aura of technological complexity). That attitude towards change and technology is human and predicable, yet there is a strong argument in favour of online work, based on the increasing importance of computers all around us. Again, I do not know which career paths are open to your students, but I doubt very much that improving their IT skills could be detrimental to them.

Feel free to contact me if you have any question/comment: Loykie.Lomine@wkac.ac.uk

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| Message posted by: | Russell Butson | (11 June 2003, 1.13pm) |
| Title: | Re: Yes, but is it for me? | |

Lominé seems to think that this forum is a good site for self-publicity, so here we go: I too recently published an article most relevant for that discussion – in BJET (the British Journal of Educational Technology) – a purposefully provocative article in which I critically denounce the current and ill-founded technology hype that surrounds us. As I wrote, we are caught up in a technologist culture and if I were you, Bloggs, I would resist as much as possible against that misguided belief into the benefits of online teaching and learning.
Best,
Russell Butson

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| Message posted by: | Dr Tuppence Beresford | (11 June 2003, 3.15pm) |
| Title: | Re: Yes, but is it for me? | |

Dear colleagues,

My recent experience can help illustrate some of the above-mentioned points and further develop the discussion. I have been working as an associate lecturer for the Open University for a couple of years and one day last year I was told that for its next run my course would be supported online, instead of the standard classroom sessions we had on a regular basis. I did not think it was appropriate, useful or necessary and I can definitely recognise the three fundamental problems outlined by Loykie Lominé. Most of my closest colleagues felt the

same, except for a couple of technophiles, or "tecchies" as we call them – but then such early adopters and innovators will always exist. We only had some basic training and were told to practice together. Just before the first sessions we were all quite nervous, anxiously waiting from feedback from one another and living on reciprocal support. What if the system crashed, what if the technology did not follow, what if the students did not follow, what if we tutors did not follow either? Now I cannot rationally say that a technological or educational miracle took place, but everything went very well for all of us, despite a few minor occasional hitches (which have their equivalent in classroom sessions anyway, like when the OHP does not work or the room is too cold). Three main reasons seem to account for that success:

- No matter whether it is for a classroom session or an online one, being thoroughly prepared as well as student-centred and supportive is always the key to ensure a successful session (and with hindsight we were so anxious we were all over-prepared) – after a few months I am now a better online teacher and I will gradually make more progress, identifying better ways to use the technology; of course you can read the books and online articles mentioned by previous contributors, of course you would benefit from joining an online course yourself (if you have time!) but a little secret is empathy: take your students' viewpoint and perspective – they too will be anxious and you need to guide them, to reassure them, to support them (like you facilitate their learning).That cannot be just improvised, you need to carefully prepare your sessions (and gradually you too will develop more confidence) with your objectives, material, activities...

- Technology can go wrong (and of course sooner or later it will) but there is nothing you and I can do about it, and that's not something we need worry about. As teachers we are expected to teach: there are other people who are responsible for the technological side of things, it is their job and they are as keen as us to see everything work smoothly (the connection, the interface, the communications...)

- Despite our doubts we tried to be as positive as possible, and it worked (not to mention the fact that it also helped the students become more positive: enthusiasm is contagious, and so is the faith in the advantages of online teaching and learning). Being negative is too easy, and indeed those colleagues who started too reluctantly did not make as much progress as those of us who accepted the challenge. A challenge it certainly was, both professionally and pedagogically – and still is – and initially we would all have prefered to teach in the traditional classroom-based way we were familiar with, but in the end it really proved fun – both for us and for our students.

Although we were all rather unsure and unconvinced at the beginning, most of us have gradually discovered and appreciated the benefits of online teaching – and some of us now even prefer teaching that way – so good luck Dr Bloggs; who knows, in a year's time you too might be a convert!

Best,

Tuppence

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Message posted by: A. Hastings   (11 June 2003, 5.03pm)

Title: Re: Yes, but is it for me?

I wonder, Tuppence, whether your experience isn't somehow biased by the fact that you were using taeching material specifically written for online purposes by OU staff – which is presumably not the case for Dr Bloggs and certainly not the case for most other academics who have to do it on top of all other commitments (teaching, research, admnistration…)
In my faculty, I oversee quality and I am very aware of the issues pertaining to the suitability of the material used for online teaching – and a constant problem (articulated by most staff I have spoken with and regularly mentioned in the literature on online teaching and learning) is the fact that it takes a lot of time to prepare material and activities to teach online (usually longer than anyone anticipates!)
A recent article by Kewell and Beeby published in 'Teaching in Higher Education' illustrates how staff in a university business school had to design learning resources for online use – they realised that it proved much more difficult and time-consuming than expected, even for staff with very high IT skills. This is a comment (or rather: a complaint!) I keep hearing, even from academics who are most enthusiastic about online teaching. Appropriate resources are rarely allocated, be it in terms of staff, training opportunities or even time (if not cash and salary levels!); when they are mentioned, opportunity costs (e.g. time taken away from research or working with more familiar systems) tend to be underrated – which is why I strongly believe that online teaching is not just an issue for academics or even staff developers, but also (and critically) one that managers need to address.
Regards,
Arthur Hastings

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Message posted by: Ariadne Oliver   (12 June 2003, 2.26am)
Title: One step further...

Dear all,
I must say that I have really enjoyed reading all your recent messages – I have learned so much, I feel like I should contribute too like to give something back – I don't want just to be just a lurker/sponge/freeloader! In my view, what took place here since Bloggs started this discussion by posting his first 'please-help-me' e-mail is paradigmatic of online teaching and learning, both in terms of knowledge creation and in terms of knowledge dissemination:

- In terms of knowledge creation, we have had a perfect example of collaborative learning as a joint discursive process (which is an ideal outcome of asynchronous e-pedagogy) which also illustrates the collective dimension of e-teaching – what could be called 'collective wisdom'. An increasing number of tutors indeed have, if not expertise translated into RAE-rated publications, at least valuable experience and enriching ideas about e-teaching, about problems they have encountered, about solutions they have designed, implemented, tested, rejected or even modellised on a very small scale. This weatlh of emerging knowledge on the pedagogy of virtal environments is highly personalised and individualised – some would say anecdotal and idiosyncratic – but unfortunately many academics, because of their training, background and habits, do not believe in personal anecdotes as a source of knowlege. That the personal may be pedagogical is anathema to them; they do not (yet) accept the value of the collective wisdom on online learning and teaching – yet speaking with colleagues who are already teaching online is a most valuable source of knowledge and inspiration, both a theoretical and at a practical level, even if those colleagues have not formally written on the

topic... maybe because they are too busy improving and developing the courses they teach online!

- In terms of knowledge dissemination, we have a perfect example of how this emergent area of scholarship can enable us to be creative and innovative. I, for one, wouldn't have read a standard article on the topic, but reading all your contributions was most entertaining, interesting – and most educational too! On the topic of online teaching and learning we all have different ideas, experiences, views and preferences, as illustrated by those messages. I would argue that writing a synthesis (in the standardised if not hackneyed form of an article) would be an unnecessary academic exercice (in the worst sense of the term 'academic'): let us celebrate the fact that we can collectively learn from each other and that several voices can coexist – we could call that polyphony, many-voicedness, multivocality, or we may even risk the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia....

So with this e-heteroglossia, are we in the process of conceptualising a new form of knowlegde dissemination/transfer/transmission, most suitable on the topic of online pedagogy because of the implicit reflexivity, but possibly useful for many other academic discussions as well?

Any reaction/comment/suggestion?

Ariadne

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