



**University of Brighton**

# Connections: sharing the learning space

Articles from the Learning and Teaching Conference 2007

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# UK and US criminology students communicate online: enhancing current learning and teaching practices

Dr Paula Wilcox, Dr Helen Jones, Maggie Sumner and Dr Eileen Berrington

## Abstract

Discussion of an international initiative involving universities in the UK and the USA focuses attention on how the use of online technologies can evolve alongside current learning and teaching practices in higher education, thus enhancing student communication. The aims of the initiative were fourfold: to change modes of student communication (individual and group), to develop students' potential to think across cultural and national borders, to extend their communication across such borders, and to develop students' ICT mediated interactional skills. The paper concludes that, although the students involved in this project study criminology and criminal justice, its structure and principles are transferrable to other disciplines.

## Introduction

As globalising forces gain momentum, the social processes impacting on our students' lives are as likely to come from outside national boundaries as from within them. The internet thus becomes a potentially powerful medium of communication, enabling students to traverse geographical and cultural boundaries. As Weller argues, the 'net changes the way people communicate and who they communicate with' (2002,34). Today's graduates are expected to be computer literate, and meeting the demands of computer literacy within the context of higher education requires that educators exercise more than their 'sage on the stage' skills. Important reports in the UK encourage the use of new technology to enhance student learning (Dearing 1997; CVCP and HEFCE 2000; HEFCE 2005), and the role of online learning is likely to be central to this (Koschmann 1996; Web-based Education Commission 2000; Schmidt and Werner 2007).

Developing students' social support, their social abilities, and their confidence in communicating with each other, has always been central to learning and teaching (Wilcox et al. 2005; Winn et al. 2007). New technology can be harnessed to add new forms and ways of communicating and networking to traditional tried and tested learning and teaching methods. Russell's (1999) now famous 'The No Significant Difference Phenomenon' compared different modes of delivery: for example, online versus classroom. His conclusion was that the mode of delivery made no difference to student performance; it was the content and what we did with the medium that was important. Mayes more recently states that: 'we have generally come to accept that delivery of 'content' is only part – and perhaps a minor part – of the important role learning technology can play in supporting learners (2007, 1). For these reasons, thinking creatively about how our students can engage with social changes and with new ways of communicating now seems imperative.

Bach, Haynes and Lewis Smith (2007,33) argue that online learning 'offers exciting new ways for students to interact and share learning'. We agree, but in this paper we do not argue for online learning merely for its own sake, nor do we argue simply that new technologies offer new possibilities (although they do). Our central argument is that the promise of online technologies and online learning opportunities lies in their evolution alongside current modes of learning and teaching in higher education. The online e-communication project described in this paper is one potentially fruitful route forward in this process of adding to and enhancing existing learning and teaching methods. McConnell (2006,9) suggests there are 'two key ideas, that of learning in groups and communities, and communicating in networked environments, [that] come together in the notion of networked collaborative elearning'. These ideas were drawn on in the development of an initiative involving criminology tutors who collaborated across two continents, the UK and the USA, and seven universities.

### **The international e-communication exchange (IEE)**

The International E-Communication Exchange (IEE<sup>1</sup>) is a project which started to change the ways in which our students were able to communicate with other students (Jones et al. 2006). The students who engaged in this project study a range of different modules in criminology and/or criminal justice studies. However, we argue that it is possible to transfer the basic structure and principles of the project to other disciplines.

The universities eventually involved in the IEE were chosen to cover a broad spectrum of geographical locations, different cultural mixes in terms of student populations, different criminal justice jurisdictions, and widely differing cultural ideas and values:

- University of Brighton
- Manchester Metropolitan University (hosts the VLE)
- University of Westminster
- University of West Florida
- University of North Carolina Wilmington
- California State University Fresno

Why did we decide to develop an international project collaborating with other universities? We live in a shrinking world where knowledge is no longer confined within geographical boundaries. Linking up with universities in another country provides an opportunity for students to experience and engage with culturally diverse ideas and practices. The IEE provides students with a range of potential benefits:

- a 'no-cost' alternative to traditional international exchange programmes
- a demanding yet rewarding experience for students
- the opportunity for collaboration across different institutions in different countries.

Although not always easy, there is pedagogic value in developing and embedding the use of communication and information technology as routine. In our view the design of the IEE offers a transferable model for other associated disciplines that hold the pedagogic desire to stimulate critical awareness, analytical thought and reflective practice.

#### **How does it work?**

Using a tailor-made Web CT-based virtual learning environment which was carefully designed and developed to provide space for discussion and a repository of supporting materials, self-tests and other relevant material including Frequently Asked Questions, the IEE offered students structured asynchronous discussion groups over a specified time period. Rovai (2006,9) suggests that '[b]reaking large numbers of students into small groups (typically under 10 learners each), providing specific tasks, and setting timelines support the concepts of situated learning and communities of practice'. Students were allocated to small discussion groups of about 10 students to discuss topics/questions over three two-week blocks (six weeks in all). In addition, there was an induction week to enable students to familiarise themselves with the VLE site and introduce themselves to other members of their group.

Students at each university follow their own distinct criminology/criminal justice modules, so at Brighton, for example, the module in which the IEE is embedded is SS222 'Trans-cultural Issues in Crime and Justice'. This is perhaps particularly apt for this project, as SS222 is 'a module to complement and broaden the Criminology and Criminal Justice programme through the consideration of a range of international and trans-cultural issues, raising critical questions about the notions of 'crime' and 'justice' in other societies, cultures, times and places' (Module Handbook 2007). What all students have in common, however, is that they will all engage with the e-communication project over a particular time period in semester two.

The timing of the project can be flexible. In this case the IEE runs for seven weeks (the first week being the induction week). Every two weeks there is a different discussion topic, and students are advised to make at least two postings on each topic. The discussion groups run alongside the universities' traditional lecture/seminar format. This is sometimes called blended elearning as the elearning is integrated or blended in with traditional modes of learning and teaching.

It is important that discussion topics should be relevant to the diverse modules being taken by the students. For example, the first topic (which proved the most popular with students) considered relationships between gun controls and crime rates. The immediate relevance of the discussion topics encouraged student engagement and proved to be an innovative medium to give students real life experience in articulating personal and cultural 'taken-for-granted' understandings, at the same time building their confidence in expressing views and developing their technical competence in using the discussion boards.

#### Box 1 Sample topic: gun control

##### Does strict gun control mean less crime?

In approaching this topic students might like to think about some of the following questions:

- what are the patterns and trends in gun related crime in your own jurisdiction?
- is there a relationship between firearms possession and crime rates which holds true internationally (Switzerland might provide an interesting example here)?
- what about the argument that citizens have a right to bear arms for legitimate purposes such as self-defence?
- what implications does stricter gun control have in relation to the arming of police officers – does an armed police force help to reduce crime?

Over the two-week discussion period each student was required to post a minimum of two responses per week, the recommended word length for each response being 300 words. We wished to encourage students to compose concise, well-researched and informative writing responding to particular points made by other students, rather than long, unwieldy 'stand alone' essays. An important section of the site showcased messages from the previous year's groups, selected as good examples of responsive team working, cultural awareness, clear communication and critical reflection skills. Although these messages were being read outside their threaded discussion, the quality was evident and they functioned well as examples of what was expected of students. The messages included in the showcase provided students with a clearer idea of the kind of responses we were seeking:

- responsive and referenced
- sharing resources
- concise but critical
- culturally aware
- moving the discussion forwards
- challenging but considerate, non-judgmental and inclusive

#### Box 2 Sample 'showcase' posting on media coverage of crime

In reply to your message, I also agree with Reiner's quote that the mass media does tend to focus their attention on the victims of crime. However this does not reflect an accurate picture of crime. As Jewkes (2004) 'Media and Crime' study reports, 65 per cent of crime coverage by the media involves interpersonal violence, however police statistics indicate that only six per cent of recorded crimes involve incidents of interpersonal violence. Furthermore, analysing the UK Home Office statistics on crime indicates that people can be victims of a vast majority of crimes, which were rarely reported on by the media. Let me give you some examples.

The media infrequently covers business and retail crime. According to the Home Office 'retail crime costs every household in the UK an extra £ 90 each year on their shopping bills and 75 per cent of retailers and 50 per cent of manufacturers experienced at least one crime in the previous year, according to the Commercial Victimization Survey (2002)'. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/business-retail-crime/>

Domestic violence claims the 'lives of two women each week and 30 men per year and is the largest cause of morbidity worldwide in women aged 19-44, greater than war, cancer or motor vehicle accidents', however the media often ignores this issue. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/crime-victims/reducing-crime/domestic-violence/>

However all these victims of crime are hardly mentioned in the news and therefore it is obvious that the mass media does not reflect the true extent of victimisation. Is this different in the USA? Does the media report on all types of crime?

A major benefit to students as elearners is that they have considerable freedom of choice over where to do their elearning – in the open computer labs on campus, in library pool rooms – or at home in their slippers! They have freedom of choice over the pace at which they work and the time when they participate – there were no 9 am starts and night owls can participate late at night, others during the day.

In 2006 almost 400 students from seven universities in the UK and the US came together with:

- similar degree programmes, with a core focus on the criminal justice system, its organisational components and processes, and its legal and public policy contexts, and
- experience of developing elearning and supporting students through the process.

This e-communication discussion project enables students to interpret and understand contemporary policy and popular concerns around crime with reference to an international dimension as well as from their own national perspective. The disciplinary relevance of the discussion topics encourages student engagement and proves to be an innovative medium to give students real life experience in articulating their understanding and thereby building their confidence.

#### **What were the outcomes and challenges?**

In feedback from our students via end of module questionnaires and broader focus group research we found that (perhaps paradoxically) it was the lesser 'outcome focused' experiences that they most valued (Jones 2005). While the final mark gained was important to them, participation was seen as having additional positive and valuable outcomes:

- *'this was the most difficult and also the most rewarding experience of my university career'*
- *'a great opportunity to broaden my horizons'*
- *'I thought it would be easy – it wasn't – but I loved it'*
- *'it made me question my own views on things'*
- *'about eight times as difficult as an essay but I'm also eight times as confident'*

The assessment postings and critical reflections were seen as instruments that set students in competition with each other and which judged them through a hierarchy of success. This discouraged some students from expressing views they thought might deviate from those expressed by their educators. This entailed a risk of strategic, surface level learning rather than critical and thoughtful engagement. Our aim, therefore, was to engage students in critical discourse that is valuable in itself as well as being preparation for their future careers. We wanted to create learning opportunities that fostered our students' desire to engage with others towards critical understanding and to develop critical self-reflection, encouraging students to examine and deconstruct their own beliefs, assumptions and values within a context in which they saw themselves not only as members of their own communities, but also bound to others in a global context (Nussbaum 1997; Weller 2002).

The Internet offers the possibility of international collaboration and represents an innovation with significant potential to support learning and teaching within disciplines that hold the pedagogic desire to stimulate critical awareness, analytical thought and reflective practice. Based on the theory of constructivism (Salmon 2005), the international collaboration discussed in this paper assigns an active role to students, providing 'room for the individual to experiment in order to create meaningful knowledge (Veen and Vrakking 2006,104).

The central aim of the IEE was to develop students' ability and confidence in communication. The group work aspect of this project aimed to help less confident students to engage with other group members in a reflective manner, working at their own pace. It also aimed to enhance and develop students' independent learning skills and thus contribute to employability. Students were expected to carry out a range of epistemic tasks (Ohlsson 1995; Salmon 1998), including: describing, explaining, defining, responding, challenging and evaluating. Salmon (2005,5) has cautioned that 'educators miss opportunities for working comfortably and effectively online because they assume that online co-operation and collaboration needs to follow similar patterns to classroom interaction'. Although working online involves different organisation, it is worth exploring whether the best aspects of classroom group working can be achieved within online and collaborative learning platforms.

Students who are new to online learning will be as anxious in using the technology as traditional 'freshers' entering their first classroom. As educators, we know that in a traditional classroom setting some students struggle with group work that requires collaborative learning. Good teachers aim to develop a range of group work skills in traditional 'freshers', including: sharing resources, challenging others, explaining position statements, reflecting, evaluating and re-evaluating, negotiating consensus and summarising. These characteristics of traditional group work interaction formed goals in the development of the e-communication project. They also helped to set analytical categories for the evaluation of the IEE, which was carried out by participating academics.

Schmidt and Werner (2007,72) have reviewed the research on future time perspective (FTP) and suggest '[p]erceived instrumentality has been confirmed as a valid predictor of key motivational factors': in essence, students were motivated by future gains and high future gain is seen as increasing motivation. A lot of interest and excitement was expressed by students thinking about participating in this project and also, not surprisingly, there was some anxiety and concern over how it was going to go:

This project involves a number of prerequisites for success, including the need for the technology to be robust and reliable. Web-CT solves the kinds of problems encountered when trying to use email for student discussions, and messages can be tracked to see what date/time they were sent. The academics involved have to be champions of the project, selling it to their heads of school and academic standards committees. The co-ordinators have to be hard working – over 4,000 messages were generated during the six week period in 2006-07, and students used the system to pose questions – and expected a quick answer! This new form of delivery and assessment needed clear mechanisms of support for the students. A generic student handbook was written, which all participating staff could customise to suit their own needs, and students were inducted in computer labs and had ongoing support in classrooms. Lectures and seminars were used to support the topics of the project and the Web-CT area was used as a repository for relevant materials and web-links. We showcased examples of good messages at the end of each two week period, and this seemed to have the effect of 'raising the standard' for subsequent topics.

The most crucial factor was trust. As academics we placed an enormous amount of trust in the project's ability to deliver its goals and to enable us to work together in the virtual environment of Web-CT. The students, for their part, trusted in our ability to make the project a success.

### **Conclusion**

*'We were breaking the physical link between campus and student' (Hirsch 2001).*

As educators we need to look at how to increase 'reach and richness ... [and] the obvious means of adding richness is through some form of computer conferencing' (Weller 2002,43). The learning and teaching project under discussion in this paper certainly added richness to the students learning opportunities but also had secondary outputs in regard to increased confidence in using ICT.

The use of carefully designed and structured e-communication between students in different universities and countries opened up the potential for students to think beyond as well as within their national borders and across cultural differences and similarities. Using a Web-CT discussion board, students constructed knowledge through discussion with students in other countries. This paper therefore makes the challenge that with the use of communication and information technology we can more than replicate the debate of the classroom: we can develop real borderless classrooms.

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