Learning Bytes: Session 5: Wed 21 July, 12:15-13:15

How can I use synchronous communication to engage with students?

The session comprised a series of presentations by the following people:
- Sue Folley, Academic Development Advisor, Computing and Library Services
- Ann-Marie Greenwood, Telephone Services Manager
- Liz Bennett, Course Leader, MSc Multimedia and e-Learning

Sue Folley: Overview of Synchronous tools
Sue introduced the session by explaining that there are a number of synchronous tools which can be used to engage with students and that in this session we only had time to give a brief overview. If more in-depth training on any of the tools mentioned in the session is required, these can be arranged.

Synchronous communication refers to a situation where all participants are available via technology at the same time but not necessarily in the same place. E.g. telephone, video conferencing, webinars, online text chat and voice chat. In contrast the term 'asynchronous' is used to refer to the use of discussion boards, blogs, wikis, screen casts, pod casts, print resources, VLEs etc, where people are communicating after a time lapse.

Video conferencing: uses static large-scale very expensive and specialist equipment, therefore can be quite daunting to use and requires technical knowledge and expertise. It is a good tool to use for distributed groups, enabling video/audio communication across campuses, institutions and organisations. Can be used as a way to communicate with an expert or guest speaker and for meetings of participants in disparate locations.

Webinar: is a term that is short for web-based seminar, and is a seminar, lecture, presentation or workshop that is transmitted over the web using desktop computers or mobile devices. All participants therefore need to access via a computer with an internet connection. Technical issues can arise and individual users need to become familiar with the functionality. As with video conferencing it is ideal for dispersed individuals, can connect with experts or guest speakers and again use for meetings. One advantage is that the session can be recorded for viewing/listening to at a later date.

Online text chat: e.g. Blackboard Office Hours, msn etc. This is a low-tech, easy to use tool that many students are familiar with. It can be effective for question and answer type sessions, for office hours and for student-to-student communication. Again it can be recorded. There is usually no video or audio element; participants are reliant on typing skills and typing speed to use effectively. Sessions can become very 'noisy' and it can be difficult to manage with large numbers of participants.

Voice chat: e.g. Skype is similar to text chat but with the addition of audio/video, it can be used with one or more students but large numbers of participants can be problematic; more suited to supervisions. It is a low-tech relatively easy to use option that can make use of free software. Headsets and microphones are required; participants tend to find it is faster to talk than type but this has the disadvantage that there is less chance to reflect before contributing.

Good practice
- Practice with the chosen technology.

- Try and participate in a session before leading one.
- Prepare the session in advance and consider timings etc.
- Establish etiquette and protocols e.g. how and when to ask questions whether interruptions are allowed.
- Allow the students to engage.
- Keep phone numbers for technical support to hand.

Support: Ipark website, School-based Learning Technology Advisors Learning Technologies, Computing and Library Services team, Staff Development sessions.

Ann-Marie Greenwood: Overview of Office Communicator

Ann-Marie and the team in Computing Services has been trialling Office Communicator for the last few months. This is a corporate secure system that can be supported centrally. It is a useful tool for communicating across sites and campuses, which has a number of functions, including instant messaging, audio and video conferencing and integrates with the telephone system as well as Outlook.

A piece of software is installed on the computer that integrates with Outlook's calendar. Once rolled out to the desktop the system logs in automatically (can be set not to), you add contacts and you are then able to see if they are available, in a meeting etc – this information comes from the individual's calendar (can see out of office) and computer use. However you can override availability or add notes about what you are doing if you don't want to be interrupted. Contacts are picked up from the internal systems external contacts e.g. students can be added. You can select a distribution list via Outlook and use this to send group messages. It can be especially useful for quick short communications and to check if a colleague is available to be contacted via phone or meet up etc.

Ann-Marie demonstrated the video conferencing facility; this can be used both on and off campus. There are different ways of accessing the system for example via a web client or mobile device.

Although initially being used as an administration tool it would be possible to use in a teaching context. Interesting questions around culture and expectations may arise.

Liz Bennett: Overview of Elluminate

Liz demonstrated the use of the Elluminate tool that is available via Blackboard. The aim was to provide a flavour of what it can be used for from a teaching and learning perspective. The screen which participants view is made up of a shared whiteboard via which presentations can be viewed and a text input box, similar to a text chat tool. There is also a participants list; the session facilitator can allocate and remove various permissions for individuals. There is a setting for maximum simultaneous users for audio and video that has to be set (to a maximum of six simultaneous users). Liz used Elluminate to contact Cath Ellis who was working at home.

Cath explained via Elluminate that she used the tool to hold tutorial sessions with her students who are on different campuses. She finds that small groups are easy to moderate but for more than six students a more structured approach is required with use of the control mechanisms. The sessions that Cath runs are not compulsory but she records them and those students who don't 'attend' usually listen to the recordings and then feedback to

Cath. The sessions are used for around 10 minutes of reflection and a recap of what has just been covered in the most recent lecture. This is followed by 'challenge' questions that Cath asks to gauge the level of understanding of the topic. The students are then invited to ask their own question of Cath.

Linda Lewis (also via Elluminate) explained that she has used Elluminate for training purposes e.g. as a participant at a JISC conference and finds it is good for asking questions etc.

Liz then explained that she uses the tool with her MSc Multimedia students as they only attend the University around five times a year. The course covers teaching and learning, research and some multimedia. This past year Liz ran weekly sessions in the Autumn (2009) as an alternative means of getting the students together. Liz designed the sessions so that a guest lecturer/speaker lead and her role was as a facilitator, this gave her the chance to get used to the medium. For example Andrew Walsh (academic librarian) gave a session on the use of Summon, Andrew used application sharing to demonstrate the system via Internet Explorer on his desktop. Guest lecturers/speakers are invited by sending a link from within Blackboard once the session is set up, so they do not need to be enrolled on the Blackboard module to take part in the session.

Liz found that using discussion topics with the students was beneficial for research and the sharing of academic challenges.

Students really valued the sessions, and students unable to attend the live sessions can still benefit by access sessions via recordings. Management of and teaching in this way can be a little stressful at first, as you have to think on you feet. However the students were very positive about the sessions and felt they beneficial to their learning.