

FEATURE

Learning and tutoring: A virtual conference

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Learning and tutoring: A virtual conference

Kenny McIntosh and Sarah Cornelius outline the experience of running an online conference using Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

The online learning and tutoring conference was co-ordinated by members of the PICTAL group (Practice in ICT and Learning) in the School of Education in the University of Aberdeen, and was held during 29-31 March 2006 using the online Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). With a target audience of educational practitioners, technologists and researchers working in schools (primary and secondary), further and higher education, community education and the public sector, commercial and industrial training, within Scotland and across the UK, the conference aims were to:

- promote best practice with ICT and learning
- bridge research and practice
- promote practitioner and classroom research
- create a networked community to sustain professional inquiry and development.

Conference themes would focus specifically on:

- creating and maintaining interactivity and engagement online
- best practice in online tutoring
- dynamics of online learning
- meeting the professional challenge of changing learner expectations
- extended and enhanced professionalism with ICT for learning.

Two pilot conferences were held in preparation for the event allowing PICTAL members to become familiar with the online Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to be used. Several members of PICTAL made virtual presentations, in a variety of formats including PowerPoint and Word, and chat sessions were held on order to test and refine operational aspects of the event. Following this a pre-conference trial was held immediately preceding the conference during which PICTAL members tested usability and design issues. Technical issues arose during the pre-conference trial, including the slow speed of the VLE, but support staff from the University's Learning Technology Unit (LTU) were able to address these issues before the actual event in March 2006.

Participation in the conference

Following nationwide publicity electronic, academic papers were sought from keynote speakers and others wishing to contribute to the conference, subject to abstracts being refereed by senior

members of the School of Education staff. Conference organisers received presentations from two very highly regarded writers in the field of ICT practice in education, Dr Erica McAteer (University of Strathclyde) and Dr Agnes Kukulska-Hulme (Open University). Erica's presentation, Developing the Scottish AERS Modules in Allied Educational Research, and Agnes' presentation, Blended Online and Mobile Learning: State of play and prospects for collaboration on the move, provided food for thought and opened the conference in a very positive way. Using the conference's online chat facility each presentation triggered discussion between a dozen or so participants. The absence of the non-verbal cues that usually underpin face-to-face dialogue (eye-contact, facial expression, etc.) was clearly not a barrier to interaction and, very quickly, participants were questioning, reasoning, deliberating, connecting, challenging and building understanding.

Besides the keynote presentations 10 additional abstracts were submitted to the conference committee and, after refereeing, eight papers were presented, including six from University of Aberdeen PICTAL group. Collectively the papers addressed a very wide range of aspects of teaching and learning in virtual learning environments.

A total of 127 delegates registered for the conference and of these, 75 logged on. Forums (asynchronous discussion areas) ran throughout the conference and 318 messages were posted with 41 delegates posting messages. In addition, five 'chat' sessions took place, two with keynote presenters and three with PICTAL members who e-moderated sessions on the topics of participant experiences of online learning and teaching, learning online and teaching online.

Feedback

Towards the end of the conference delegates were provided with an online evaluation proforma comprising a questionnaire and a 5-point Likert scale grid. Although the return rate was low, responses to the questionnaire revealed that participants felt they had received useful feedback on research ideas, details of further sources of information, and that they had developed valuable contacts with others interested in similar areas of research. The Likert grid addressed participant satisfaction with pre-conference publicity, the

conference website and registration, the conference aims and themes, the presentations, chat and discussions. With a maximum possible rating of 5 the average rating of participant satisfaction was 4.4.

Comments obtained in feedback include:

This was my first online conference and I thoroughly enjoyed it – no tedious travelling or staying in some hotel... The quality of presentations was excellent, as were the discussion forums and live chats.

It was evident that a lot of thought and hard work were put into the planning and delivery of the conference.

I was somewhat sceptical to begin with, but I got a real sense of community and joining in with something bigger, lively and busy. I also gained a real sense of attending a 'conference'

I was hoping to gain new information and knowledge, which I have.

It was good to hear the opinions of other people involved in online learning and teaching, and to understand the methodology and ethos of other institutions. I felt that I gained wider knowledge of online technologies.

When informal evaluation among PICTAL members was added to the online feedback a clear impression emerged of the effectiveness of the PICTAL group's inaugural virtual conference as a viable and valuable means of bringing together researchers and practitioners working with Information and Communications Technologies. Consequently, the experience of hosting such a conference will be shared with colleagues in Aberdeen University's School of Education and it is hoped that other virtual conferences covering a variety of disciplines can evolve from this tentative first venture