Online learning: Who is doing the learning?

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In 2009 Curtin University became the provider of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) through Open Universities Australia. The course started promisingly with 800 enrolments, but over the course of eighteen months has grown exponentially to over five thousand. Offering these courses has been challenging, and those responsible for the building of units with over two thousand students have realized that they, along with the students are on a steep learning curve- hence the question "Who is doing the learning?"

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Challenges include

- How can we modify units for on-line students while retaining the integrity of the content offered to face-to-face consumers?
- How can we support our isolated students to construct a learning environment which will assist them to engage in a vibrant, active and meaningful learning experience?
- What strategies can we employ to engage in higher order critical thinking?

Imposed structure

- The use of an LMS (in this case Blackboard) is mandated. This presents problems as while the system is bureaucratically efficient as a learning tool (Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005), it imposes a structure which could be stifling and limiting.
- One solution was to look outside the LMS for technology which is free, flexible, well designed and simple for novices to use.

One strategy

- Wikis are an interesting communicative building tool, the most recognizable of which is Wikipedia.
- We use EtherPad, an application originally released by a small innovative company in 2009 and later free sourced to include many different sites.
  Its advantages include:

  I.   It operates in real time, so that students who are placed in tutorial groups in the same time-zone can meet on-line to collaborate on a chat-pad and modify the wiki on a main page.
  II. Each student is assigned a colour code so that it is easy to see who is communicating with whom. If students are unable to "chat" in real time, they can still participate when they are able.

III. A non-deletable time-slider function enables both participants and tutors to see when and how often students are talking.
IV. The application is very easy and intuitive to use, is reliable, private and free.

Reactions

- Tutors noted that students became relaxed and comfortable with the technology and used it in quasi-social engagement as well as for tasks, developing skills for life-long learning (Carmean & Haefner, 2002).
- Many students apparently found themselves on more familiar ground than the LMS, communicating as they might on social networking tools with discussion enabling greater learning (Buraphadeja & Dawson, 2008).
- An exit survey showed an 89% approval rating of this technology. 77% had never used a wiki before, but after the experience, 92% felt that they could teach someone else to use EtherPad or a clone successfully.

Spin-off

- Peer review became transparent to both students and tutors as contribution could be easily tracked.
- Students felt that their opinion through the peer review process was both accurate and valued by their peers and by staff.
- Students made connections within their own locations all over Australia and the world, and some were able to meet physically.
- Construction of knowledge was made possible, exciting and rewarding by real-time participation of small groups (up to five): the end results reflected the satisfaction students gained from co-operative learning (Järvelä, Järvenoja and Veermans, 2008).

Where to now?

- Learning design and pedagogy in on-line learning is at the fore-front of a new frontier.
- How can we effectively connect students and teachers in a new world of rapidly growing technology change?
- How can we create support mechanisms which stretch the boundaries of teaching and learning beyond the narrow confines of the LMS?
- We need to consider how to further engage students and their teachers in quality interaction and collaboration as the gap between those who teach and those who learn becomes more indistinct and fuzzy.

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