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EMBEDDING EXPERTISE FOR
ONLINE TUTOR DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract
This paper describes the ongoing developmental interaction between the Charles Darwin University's Academic Consultants and tutor team of CUC 100, Academic literacies. This generic skills unit consists of a large number of concurrently enrolled students, studying in both internal and external modes, and has a required online discussion requirement. The developmental focus is on the tutors' online discussion facilitation skills. The interaction between the two roles (consultant and tutor) is becoming increasingly interactive, and more deeply embedded along the observer-participant continuum.

Background

For some time there have been pressures to deliver core undergraduate units to students on a larger scale (Roberts, 1993). Recently (Luca & Oliver, 2001), these core units must also be foundational, ensuring that students will acquire a base of "generic skills" which will be developed further, in an integrated way, as they progress through higher-level discipline-specific units constituting a diversity of course pathways.

The rapid adoption of online learning systems (Schott, Chernish, Dooley & Lindner, 2003; Compora, 2003) is also concurrent with these trends for larger class sizes and generic skills integration. Institutions are implementing these technologies for delivery and supplementing face-to-face units on a large scale. Within this there seems to be a trend, toward combining internal (face-to-face) students in cohort with external (totally online) which presents benefits and complexities (Soules, 1999),

Charles Darwin University (CDU) has responded to this triad of pressures by implementing the "Common Unit Program" which in addition to addressing "fundamental academic skills" are designed to
> *. . . Enable students to assume responsibility for their own learning, both within the University and beyond.*
> *Common Units provide students with the opportunity to examine issues relevant to their chosen career and the social, cultural and political environment in which they will work and study*. (Northern Territory University, 2003)

All undergraduate students are required to complete two common units, with CUC100, *Academic Literacies* being compulsory, with the additional common unit being elected from CUC101A *North of the Great Divide*, CUC 104 *Northern Exposure*, and CUC 105 *Cultural Studies*. Additional elective Common Units are presently under development. Students may enrol in CUC 100 in either "external" (totally online) or "internal" (2 face-to-face tutorials per week) mode.

In either mode, students are required to participate in online discussions within the University's *Learnline* (using Blackboard Courseware) environment. In Semester 1, 2003 total enrolments for both external and

internal modes exceeded 700 students. To manage the instructional workload, the course co-ordinators for CUC 100 rely on a team of 10 tutors. Tutors are responsible for leading and managing the online discussion boards, which are setup for tutorial groups of up to 20 students. Some tutors may lead as many as a half-dozen groups.

This paper describes the support and interaction of Academic Consultants from CDU's Academic Development Team for/with the team of coordinators and tutors, in developing the online discussion moderation skill base of the instructional group.

Competencies Required for Online Discussion Moderation

Recently, much has been written toward defining what may be considered good practice, or competency, for practitioners facilitating online learning in general (Sanders, 2001; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples & Tickner, 2001;), and "e-moderating" (facilitation of online discussions) in particular (Salmon, 2000). These competencies are often framed in discussions of the quality of online education delivery (Bickle & Carroll, 2003). Awareness of this literature, however, is situated mainly within the disciplines of education, human resource development, and higher education development. A rational starting point, it would seem, is to identify in the literature potential competencies, which are particularly salient.

Goodyear et al sought to enumerate the required competences (first by "roles," see Table 1) "in a way that minimizes problems of understanding and interpretation across national linguistic and cultural boundaries" also noting that "the terms used should also work in the various sectors of education and training, compulsory schooling, university, corporate training, and so forth" (p. 67). They soon found out that producing such a broad-based set of benchmarks was problematic. The work described in this concise paper is less ambitious, and its authors will be pleased if a set of competencies can be identified as suitable, and strategies identified which will support competent performance by tutors working within large units in contemporary higher education.

Process Facilitator	Content Facilitator
Adviser-Counsellor	Technologist
Assessor	Designer
Researcher	Manager-Administrator

Table 1: Role Competencies (Goodyear, et. al. 2001)

Bickle & Carrol (2003) looked at competencies in terms of behaviours or tasks, which the online "instructor" should perform within a system which includes instructor, learner, content, technology, software (in their case, WebCT), and communication.

Post an introductory welcome	Offer consistency in the delivery of information across courses	Explain how to download documents	Provide technical instructions clearly
Provide the course syllabus	Use content examples from the news	Disseminate assignment information	Explain confidentiality of grades
Require learner check-in	Develop Learning objectives for lectures	Offer a time frame in which to complete quizzes and exams	Refer to relationships among courses
Check the bulletin board daily	Design assignments that stimulate critical thinking skills	Randomly assign questions into the database	Offer extra credit
Explain the guidelines for posting messages	Encourage the use of threaded messages	Create assignments that encourage learners to maintain regular progress	Respect copyright guidelines
Provide a summary of due dates			Provide public access to the syllabus
Develop a template for lectures within the course			

Table 2: Behavioural Competencies (Bickle & Carrol, 2003)

Salmon (2000) identified a progression of five levels through which the e-moderator must move the discussion group:
  (1)   Access and motivation;
  (2)   Online socialization;
  (3)   Information exchange;
  (4)   Knowledge construction; and
  (5)   Development

A next reasonable step would be to select from the general competency literature those competences that seem particularly suitable for performance by tutors in higher education in pursuit of the educational objectives and under the background conditions already described. There is still more literature from which to distil tutoring competencies, but to review it exhaustively is not possible in the space allowed here. However, the current work with CDU's CUC 100 team will benefit from ongoing review and integration of items identified as appropriate for tutors.

At this point it may seem obvious that tutors charged primarily to moderate the CUC 100 online discussion forums need not perform many of the competencies listed above. (There are also some assessment responsibilities.) The breadth of competencies required of a course co-ordinator is much greater than those required by tutors. In development work to date with the tutor team, we have used the following competencies, which can be categorized simply as *technical* (relating to operating the functions available in the Blackboard package) and *pedagogical*.

The list of technical competencies is at the level of tasks, and has been compiled based upon common functions of widely deployed Learning Management Systems (LMS) and focusing on skills needed for managing discussion forums (see Table 3).

Discussion Forums
-Access an existing discussion forum, view discussion postings (links) according to available options, e-mail individual participants, add threads/post replies, and lock/unlock/remove threads or messages and create and modify archives
-Add a new discussion forum, including settings for anonymous posts, message editing and removal, file attachments, blocked users, and new threads
-Sort messages in discussion by author, date, title
-Collect messages in printer format
- Remove and archive existing discussion forum
-Modify an existing discussion forum including any settings for forum administration (e.g. for tutors), anonymous posts, message editing and removal, file attachments, blocked users, and new threads
-Upload (attach) documents with comments to the discussion board

Communications Utilities
-List, access and manage the LMS' communications tools, including announcements, staff information, discussion boards, send e-mail, and synchronous collaboration facilities
-Add, modify or remove an announcement
-View existing announcements chronologically
-Add, modify, remove and order staff information content

Synchronous Collaboration
-Open the LMS' whiteboard and use the tools available to move, cut, copy, paste delete, group, ungroup, bring to front, send to back, snapshot, pencil, insert text, straight line, square, circle and equation editor in order to present information to participants in the live session.
-Use the LMS' group browser to preview and collectively view web-pages and record URLs to archive (if Record is switched on)
-Use the ask question tool to ask a question of other participants
-Use the LMS' whiteboard to ask a question to all participants
-View and respond (privately or publicly) to questions submitted by participants
-Record a live chat room (classroom) session

Table 3: Technical Competencies for e-moderating via Learning Management Systems (cont. next page)

-Describe and set user access and functionality
-Set options (inline or separate window) for viewing private messages within the Virtual Classroom to either active or passive
-Terminate the live chat room (classroom) session for all participants
-Enable sub-groups of participants to access a separate simultaneous session, apart from the main session

Other Interactions
Send email (including attachments) to selected individuals, all users, or selected
Create groups and set group options available to support discussions, synchronous chat, file exchange and email at the group level
Add a new group, including assignment of student members
Modify the group membership (add or remove student members) name, description, member list and options
Delete a group
View student comments submitted alongside their assignment files

Table 3 (Cont.): Technical Competencies for e-moderating via Learning Management Systems

The pedagogical competencies identified so far in the development work at CDU are listed below in Table 4. These competencies would seem to rely on principles that are derived from constructivist (Jonassesen, Beck & Kyle, 1999) and social learning theory frameworks (Bandura, 1997).

-Recognize scenarios that may benefit from personal, private, or course content discussion boards.
-Express general communication/participation criteria in a clear rubric to students
-Promote and model to students "social presence" and online immediacy through the use of emoticons
-Use basic HTML in postings, including copying and pasting the stimuli for responses within threads, providing URLs in hypertext, copying HTML pages into postings.
-Manage student questions as a learning community rather than as an email bureau
-Set a clear policy on instructor response and evaluation times
-Set a clear policy on online etiquette and content within course discussion boards and synchronous tools
-Set a clear policy on timing of online community participation expectations/requirements within the course schedule
-Devise strategies for supporting, encouraging students to use the available technology to enhance their collaborative group work

Table 4: Pedagogical Competencies for e-moderating

Strategies for Developing Competencies in Online Discussion Moderation

Initial work has been done on the client based training model, doing analysis by offering the CUC100 team a "menu" in the form of the above technical and pedagogical competences, and delivering, so far, two traditional workshops in a computing lab. At the most recent workshop, a more embedded performance model was proposed, wherein the Academic consultants would participate in private forum within the course site, which was for discussion concerning performance and problems/solutions to developing a learning community between tutors and students. This proved a fruitful line of discussion, as it led to identifying the opportunity for an Academic Consultant experienced in online learning moderation to join the team of tutors for the upcoming semester. This will provide an even deeper level of embedded expertise, and the opportunity to model interactions in the online environment with not only the tutors, but also to model interactions with students as a member of the team.

Method of Enquiry

It is intended that this scenario and setting will provide a rich population of data upon which to employ two modes of qualitative enquiry. The Academic Consultants as researchers will be in the participant/ observer mode - one in the online environment interacting in the tutors only discussion forum. The second will be more deeply embedded along the participant observer continuum (Glesne, 1999), participating

both in the tutors' forum, and also in a forum with accountability for creating an online learning community with students of CUC 100.

The methods and responsibilities will generate a case study from the multiplicity of data to be captured by the embedded consultant/tutor within the bounded system of CUC100's tutoring team (Creswell, 1998, p. 61) and an opportunity to generate grounded theory concerning tutor development and compare emergent phenomenon with the existing online competency literature based on the discussion forum texts (Creswell, 1998, p. 179). This research effort will be careful to avoid the research ethics issues identified by McCormack, Applebee and Donnan (2003) where verbatim texts, including the identities of online students, were included in a publication.

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