# A dialogic approach to online facilitation

**Jennie Swann**
Centre for Educational & Professional Development
Auckland University of Technology

Social construction of understanding has long been a significant underlying principle of learning and teaching and while there are many models for the design of online activities to promote this there are considerably fewer models for the facilitation of such dialogue. This paper examines some of these facilitation models from the point of view of a university lecturer seeking to encourage social construction of understanding through online dialogue and proposes an alternative which extends the principles of Community of Inquiry theory. It describes a design-based research project which focuses on the dialogue itself in a university learning environment, and on the development of facilitation techniques which will encourage it to flourish.

The proliferation of social software tools has brought with it an escalation of informal learning through online dialogue among mainly young people, many of whom are also university students. Downes (2004, para. 35), among others, has for some time referred to the Internet as a meeting place where dialogue is replacing information publishing and retrieval. Paradoxically however, students can be resistant to attempts to integrate such dialogue into their formal learning. This paper describes a research project which focuses on the dialogue itself in a university learning environment, and on the development of facilitation techniques which will encourage it to flourish, rather than on the affordances of the technological tools available.

## Dialogue and learning

Learning through dialogue with others has a long history. Plato learned from Socrates through dialogue and argumentation. Dewey (1910/1991) argued that learning is most effective when it is situated in an authentic real-world context and that this context is social as well as physical. Vygotsky's (1986) zone of proximal development theory has been interpreted (by Lave & Wenger, 1991, among others) to mean that students learn better collaboratively because it is dialogue with others which pushes them into this "societal" space between the everyday behaviour of the individual and social practice (p. 48). This space is dynamic in that it is itself changing, and influenced by the individuals in it, through "the negotiated character of meaning" (p. 33). Swan and Shea (2005) identify three main themes of learning theory which are distinctively social. These are that cognition is situated in particular social contexts; that knowing is distributed across groups; and that learning takes place in communities. These themes underpin many of the prevailing theories of online pedagogy such that these approaches require students to engage with their course content through dialogue with their peers. This has proved difficult to achieve online (Kreijns, Kirschener, & Jochems, 2003; Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003; Swan, 2004). There is no lack of models for the *design* of learning and collaborative activities and a great deal has also been published in the form of research and case studies on the *facilitation* of social and collaborative learning online. However, there is a need for a practical approach which is readily usable by online tutors and this is the focus of the current research project.

## Why do we need a new approach?

Salmon (2000, 2002) provides perhaps the only model which is specifically designed to help tutors to facilitate discussions online and many have found it extremely effective as a starting-point. However, Stages 1 and 2, learning to use the technology and online socialisation, are both in practice revisited repeatedly throughout the life of an online discussion (Swann & Sevelj, 2005). The dialogue often stalls at Stage 3, information sharing or "cumulative dialogue"; the true collaboration of Stage 4 has proved

more elusive (see e.g. Chai & Khine, 2006). From a tutor's perspective, many of the issues of facilitating learning dialogue online are much the same even when different tools are used (Elgort, Smith, & Toland, 2008; Forte & Bruckman, 2007). A non-linear model may be more realistic.

Baker, Jensen and Kolb's (2002) conversational model focuses on "a space where conversation can occur" (p. 64). They propose five dialectical dimensions of this space which need to be engaged simultaneously in order for learning to occur. However, on closer examination this appears to be another way of looking at Kolb's familiar experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). There has been criticism of its theoretical underpinnings (Oxendine, Robinson, & Willson, 2004, para. 30) and there are difficulties with his notion of concrete experience, since it does not really include the social aspects of experience. Also in practice university students often "experience" something by reading about it; this is two levels of abstraction (speech and text) away from the concrete (Laurillard, 2002b).

Laurillard (1993, 2002a) has proposed a conversational model of learning which has been criticised on the grounds that the community of practice concept of progression from novice to expert which it entails is extended too far (Wise & Quealy, 2006). Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice model is based on his work with large industrial firms and in this environment communities grow, mature and die over a period of years. Membership of a community is voluntary and changes during the community's life cycle as the original core moves on and peripheral members gain expertise and move towards the centre. In a modular university system a one-semester course does not allow sufficient time for such a community to form, let alone mature, and students are not generally given the option of not participating (Carusi, 2006).

There has been some confusion in online learning research literature between Community of Practice and Community of Inquiry theory. The Community of Inquiry model is based, at least in part, on Lipman's Philosophy for Children work (2003). Garrison, Anderson and Archer developed Lipman's model, and their own research into online learning in the 1990s, into their Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, 1997; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) which is often shown as a Venn diagram in which the sets of cognitive presence, social presence and tutor presence overlap to create the educational experience. A significant amount of research has been done on the various aspects and implications of this model for online learning (e.g. Duron, Limbach, & Waugh, 2006; Hron & Friedrich, 2003; Hung, Chen, & Koh, 2006; Melrose & Bergeron, 2007; Merchant, 2006; Tu, 2002; Weterman, 2004). The emphasis of much of this research is on the people having the conversation rather than on the conversation itself. In contrast, Wegerif (2007) proposes an alternative model, also based on Lipman's (2003) community of inquiry work, which takes a dialogic approach as opposed to a dialectic one.

## A dialogic focus

Wegerif cites both Lipman (2003) and Ennis (1987) to define critical thinking as "formulating hypotheses, *alternative ways of viewing* a problem, questions, possible solutions, and plans for investigating something" (Wegerif, 2007, p. 71, my italics). This is the kind of thinking which students find so difficult to express when they are learning something new, perhaps because emerging ideas are very vulnerable to criticism. People are generally unwilling to say something which they are not sure of to people they cannot see and hardly know. Wegerif adapts Lipman's model to include other types of dialogue which contribute to the development of trust and understanding yet which may be easier for students to express. *Creative dialogue* opens up a reflective space in which issues can be explored with encouragement and trust. Creative thinking, and thus creative dialogue, appears to have an important role in discovery. Koestler (1969) documents the work of a number of scientists, among them Maxwell, Pasteur and Einstein, whose discoveries were often the result of creative leaps of intuition followed, rather than preceded, by logical reasoning. Cutting-edge scientific discovery is different from learning that which is already known to others; yet the process is similar, "For man cannot inherit the past, he has to recreate it" (Koestler, 1969, p. 268). Koestler also describes the concept of "ripeness" for discovery, in which a researcher is so steeped in the relevant knowledge that there is ample fuel for the creative spark. Perhaps in the same way student discussion which has been cumulative in nature may provide fuel for an intuitive spark of understanding. Indeed Wegerif and his colleagues have found this to occur (de Laat, Chamrada, & Wegerif, 2008). A third aspect of this reflective space is *caring dialogue*, which is also not critical in any way. It aims not only to allow, but actively to draw out the distinctiveness of others' arguments and ideas, something which is very important in the multicultural classes of today. The focus is on listening and understanding (Bakhtin, 1986), or reading and understanding in an asynchronous online environment. These are not separate thinking skills, nor are they hierarchical, but dimensions of reflective dialogue (Wegerif, 2007, pp. 152-155). This model of reflective dialogue and its supporting structures underpins part of the research in the ARGUNAUT Project, a collaboration of seven European universities

and research centres, whose goal is to provide an approach and software tools to help tutors to support online synchronous discussion among small groups (Asterhan et al., 2008; de Laat & Wegerif, 2007).

## Researching a dialogic approach

A research project is under way to extend and expand this work to develop and iteratively test a professional development intervention which will support tutors of post-graduate courses in facilitating asynchronous learning dialogue online. A design-based research (DBR) approach is being taken (van den Akker, Gravmeijer, McKenney, & Nieveen, 2006). DBR is a work in progress whose methods, underpinning philosophy and criteria for success have received criticism as not fully coherent (Rowland, 2007). Each of these issues is being addressed as the research proceeds. The research will involve three iterations, each involving participants from different faculties and each informing the revision of the intervention for the next. McKenney et al (2006) argue that DBR is often chosen as a research approach "because of the opportunities it offers to help improve educational realities directly" (p. 83).

Tutors attend a professional development session in which the approach is modelled in their learning of it and they then design an online discussion activity of their own as well as developing their facilitation approach. As with earlier tests of the dialogic approach, the establishment of ground rules by and for student participants is essential, as is attention to "intersubjective orientations", participants' attitudes towards each other and their modification of their dialogue in light of these attitudes. Once ground rules have been negotiated, tutors add these to a "facilitation wiki" which also includes keywords relating to the learning material plus facilitation heuristics. They can then use a split screen on the computer in order to draw on the wiki to facilitate the dialogue and also to update it as new insights into the online dialogue emerge. Tutors each keep a blog in which they record the activity they design for their students together with descriptive information about it. While the activity is running they keep a daily diary of their observations and reflections on the dialogue events.

Discourse analysis of discussion forums will be used to identify key indicators of critical, creative and caring dialogue: higher-order thinking, application of previously negotiated groundrules and intersubjective orientation. Variability is an essential and expected feature of discourse, both between and within participants, and discourse analysis will enable the identification of features which are essentially the same but which are expressed very differently (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discussion forum contributions will be mapped to see who is talking to whom and how often in order to provide an insight into the group dynamics. These results will be compared with tutor participant blog commentaries and wiki contributions as well as student participant survey responses in order to validate (or not) the findings from the analysis of the dialogues themselves. Participant students will also be asked to comment and reflect on their experiences during their online discussion activity through a short online survey based on Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (2002). The first iteration of the research took place in the first semester of 2009 and analysis of this data is under way. Some preliminary results will be available by the end of the year.

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**Author:** Jennie Swann is a Flexible Learning Advisor in the Centre for Educational & Professional Development at Auckland University of Technology. Before moving to New Zealand she worked as lecturer in communication studies and instructional designer in a variety of educational institutions in the UK, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malawi and Fiji. Email: jennie.swann@aut.ac.nz

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