

# Nattering over the net to meet Learning Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

The uptake of learning management systems, LMS, in New Zealand tertiary education has led to some distinct breeds of lecturers. There is the variety that 'set and forgets' content, content with the word processed and data show material being safely clicked into place. Then there are the constructivists keen to twist the system to further pedagogical approaches. Each group are meeting directions from tertiary institutions on minimum requirements of online interaction with students -but to what effect on learning outcomes? This paper focuses on LMS chats and online forums tools for blending delivery to meet learning outcomes.

Chats enable students and lecturers to interact in real time. Online forums allow the lecturer to define several forums which act as threads to topics for users. Other users can post replies to topics and start new ones as they wish. These LMS tools add to a contextual collaborative culture to provide a knowledge-sharing system to coordinate learning activities.

Posting topics for positive learning outcomes requires a skill set from the lecturer to moderate the content and social interaction, manage technicalities and meeting curriculum standards.

Conclusions are that lecturer led nattering on the net can contribute to meeting learning outcomes. Chats are most suited to online socialisation and familiarising students to the learning environment. Discussion forums provide asynchronous information exchange and student-organised learning. Further computer education research involves identifying professional development on using collaboration tools, and analysing the learner in such an environment.

### Key words:

learning management systems, pedagogy, online forums, chats, learning outcomes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This descriptive study documents the use of learning management system chats and online forums tools for blending delivery to meet learning outcomes. Unobtrusive measures of gathering polytechnic staff comments and a literature review contribute to this phenomenon of interest. This paper is simply a guide to the issues and

possibilities of using these tools for situations where face-to-face interaction is the dominant blended delivery mode.

## 2. CHATS AND FORUMS

Chats enable students and the lecturer text-based synchronous interaction with each other. Online forums allow the lecturer to define forums which act as threads to topics for users. This asynchronous text-based forum lets students post replies and files and/or hyperlinks to topics and start new threaded topics. Typically in a LMS the forum includes logs of who uploaded and downloaded material and when this occurred. This information is displayed, allowing participants to identify who has read their message or downloaded their file. Typically, the lecturer administers the forum as to whether messages can be edited or deleted by students after posting and if anonymous posting are allowed. Typically, students and the lecturer only have access to the LMS for enrolled/delivered courses. Students are able to take control of time and pace and the advantages of learning from each other.

These LMS tools contribute to a contextual collaborative culture to provide a knowledge-sharing system to coordinate learning. This coordination requires the lecturer to have a skill set in use of the tools, engaging social interaction, troubleshooting LMS technicalities and meeting curriculum standards.

Tertiary education providers committed to blended delivery via learning management systems provide lecturer direction as to the minimum requirements of online interaction with students. The functionality of a lecturer often has



the largest effect on the dynamics of the learning management system. Such centralised control of both administrator and lecturer roles can be positive, but also can be occasionally negative to the success of learning outcomes. A part of the reason for this lies in the top down approach by individuals and small groups rather than emerging from the needs of the learners to learn.

Course interactions lead to complex behaviour in the LMS as a whole, which may lead to consequences quite different from those intended. A common theme from polytechnic staff discussions was that a means of discussing resources using a threaded discussion forum was seldom used by students. Largely it seems to have failed because the students saw no special need for online dialogue, unless marks were allocated to the event. Most students on courses were already seeing each other in class, and had their own study/resource groups. Often student comment on a particular resource was redundant as a comment mechanism was provided.

Mann and McGregor (2002) followed on from Pask's and Lewis (1968) theory and suggest the face-to-face consideration of conversations is now blurred as we begin to deliver conversations via technologies. Dron (2001, October) agrees that such blurred conversation may provide negative feedback loops due to ambiguities reflected by different users' usage of relationships, ageing of resources, cold start online with no resources, and scheduling of synchronous events, among other reasons. For example with ageing resources, a news item would usually be more transient than a critique of a methodology. Dron (2001, October) states an obvious solution would be to allow users to decide an appropriate measure of transience, but this would also increase the burden on the learner. Cold starting without resources provides the chat or forum learner little incentive to use it until resources are available. However, it must be used in order for resources to be added. Without ratings, it is not easy to identify the value of resources. Lecturers could force positive feedback loops from the start and to grow by chunking. Existing threads could be either force-started by scheduling work around the addition of resources, with incentives by allocating marks to students based on their degree of contribution and rating of others contributions.

This allows a high degree of self-organisation to occur.

Lecturers as moderators, lecturers and participants of LMS chats and online learning require professional development so as to provide mainly positive feedback loops.

## 2.1 Lecturer varieties

For an understanding of the utilization of e-learning in teaching, Mitchell & Clayton (n.d) surveyed polytechnic staff and categorised them into five main groups. Two groups' characteristics fit the polytechnic staff observed –which do you mostly fit?

“Group A (eConstructivists)

*I use computers to provide maximum opportunities for dialogue with my students and among my students (eg, through on-line discussion groups, chat groups, as well as through e-mail).*

Group B (Set and forgets)

*I mainly use e-learning as an aid or supplement to my normal face-to-face teaching.*

*I use computers largely as a means of transmitting the content that I normally deliver in face-to-face classes. For example, I often provide access to online lecture notes and reading lists. I often have regular e-mail communication with individual students, but not to the point of setting up on-line discussion groups.”*

(Mitchell & Clayton, n.d).

Their categorisation is used here to reflect the observations made of lecturer readiness to use the tools in a learning management system. Of interest was the labelling that chats and discussion groups are lecturer led, and student led. This reflects that student learning can be self-organising.

## 2.2 Planning the tool use

A guide to issues and possibilities in planning the use of chats and forums in a LMS which follows is adapted from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (n.d.):

- Identifying options for student engagement from eclass tutorials/lecture, self-paced material
- Learner technology requirements

- Instructions for learners on how to use the tools
- Lecturer technology requirements
- Learners' engagement with the content
- Learners' interactions with the lecturer
- Learners' interactions with other learners

This setting up of the LMS provides access and motivation (Salmon, 2002) for learners. Parry, (2004) identified that students in terms of forum postings are more likely to post from outside class hours than they are to read from outside. Staff members are, in contrast, more likely to read postings from outside than any other activity measured. This has implications for scheduling chat/forum events.

### 2.3 Social Interaction

Of Salmon's (2002) five stage model for e-learning she places chats as useful for creating an e-community spirit (to stage two) and not great for meeting learning outcomes. Typically, relationships are hard to attain online if students do not know each other in a real-life context. Also, collecting useful data from other students while interacting in a multiple user domain, MUD, is not easy.

### 2.4 Technicalities, induction, netiquette

Student access to the learning tools on the LMS, staff professional development and student induction are required to reduce technical errors. This aids progression from dabbling in forums to using them for knowledge-sharing. Lecturers are moderators of the content that transpires. Moderating and encouraging students to follow a netiquette adds to positive learning activities and conversations. An amalgam of netiquette rules follow:

- Please keep your topics and responses relevant to the forum topic. If any off-the-topic posts or responses are made, please ignore them; they will be handled by the moderator.
- This forum is for all course members and intended for constructive dialogue. If you have any doubts feel free to email the moderator. Never assume references you make will be

understood by all participants. There may be learners with different cultural, national, or educational backgrounds, so please explain anything you reference. A quick explanation keeps the forum on-topic and concise. When responding to a post, please edit out whatever isn't directly applicable to your reply. Reading a long message in quotes over and over again for the response is tedious. Rather than copying heaps of text or graphics to the forum, whenever possible reference a site by supplying its URL. Summarise its key points. Inflammatory posts, profanity, or other inappropriate language will not be tolerated.

- Any use of the forum to advertise will be removed.
- Please treat others in the forum as you would like to be treated.

### 2.5 Curriculum, Course components & Chats and Forums Usage

The components of learning management course(s) observed to have been delivered with chats and forums were content delivery, assessment, tutorials, access to resources, moderation, learning exercises/activities, and learner collaboration/peer support. Typically this meant the lecturer led structured curriculum content by moderated full class discussions, moderated small groups for discussion and chats; and students referred to hyperlinks; attachments, text, graphics and pictures accessed from the LMS.

### 2.6 Instructional Strategy Description

Students need to construct knowledge and develop critical and self-reflective skills (Salmon, 2002) using LMS tools. Other possibilities for forum use to consider are:

- Lecture notes available online for download and discussion.
- Discussion forums, chat rooms for social interaction.
- Forums where open discussions are led by one or more students, and an entire course.
- Chat sessions for small group work, supported by asynchronous email or bulletin boards.

- Group projects involving case studies, problem solving exercises, debates, brainstorming, which result in a final product posted.
- Forums where works are published or findings presented, and to gather feedback.
- Case studies of real-world problems supported by forum discussion.
- Summarising web site links posted and assessed for contribution towards the curriculum.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has considered some of the aspects of chats and online forums and how the interactivity of the tools contributes to student learning outcomes both positively and negatively. The conclusions are that lecturer led nattering on the net contribute, albeit in a small way, to meet positive learning outcomes. The implications to be explored for computer education involve creating valid professional development in collaboration tools for blended delivery, and analysing the learner in such a learning management environment.

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