# Employing computer conferencing at undergraduate level

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## The Personal and Institutional Context

I'm going to tell you the story of my attempts to get students to do group work by using an electronic conferencing system - and I will show you this system as we go along.

## Culture of the faculty

I came to UWE from a completely non-academic background as a mature student about 12 years ago. The year after I started my Sociology degree, a new joint Social Science and Information systems degree programme began - and I was quite miffed that I had missed the opportunity of doing that degree. So even at that time, and even though I really had no idea about what computers were before coming to the university, I was quite interested in the uses of technology. In my final year - much to the astonishment of many of my fellow students - I took a course in computer methods. Six rather nerdish young men and me! I tell you this not only to tell you about my attitudes. I also want to suggest that as far as my knowledge goes there has always been a small but influential group of people within ESS that have been keen on technological innovation. There is also quite a lot of resistance, however, and some staff who engage with technology only to the degree that they absolutely have to. I guess this is pretty much the norm within the academy.

## Physical resources

At the current time we have 4 computer rooms for ESS students within the faculty and about one computer for every 10 students, I think. Each of these rooms has a print station. There are also university-wide computer facilities that our students can use both at Frenchay and in the City Centre. These include 24hourr laboratories. I think that I should also note that many students now have their own computers and since the application I am going to talk about is a

web-based one it can be accessed from any computer with an internet link - and 'How can I access this from home?' is one of the most frequent questions I now get asked in training sessions.

## Training for staff and students

New students are offered 3 one hour training sessions during the induction period and they are given one of these training handbooks. The tutors are also given a guide on what to cover to ensure uniformity in the type of tuition given. One of the key things that we demonstrate during the first session is what we call The Faculty Wide Information System - our faculty website. I will try to show you this now.

## Inspiration

The First-Class conferencing system and was really the inspiration for the work I want to talk about - along with my colleague Stuart Stein who introduced me to the system and who started this development within the Faculty. First-Class is really an electronic bulleting board which is divided into specialist areas. Anyone can access the system from the web but what you have access to within the system depends on your status. So, guests, at the bottom of the hierarchy, have limited access, administrators - like me - have access to everything. All ESS Students and staff have access to the student conferences. (There are lots of neat/fun things). My module is Social Psychology and within the conference there are sub-conferences where the staff can post information and announcements - admin, a conference where I post my lectures, a place where students can post feedback - though they don't really use this! And this is indicative of the problem that I am struggling with! There are also the project groups. I can access all of these; students can only access the group to which they belong. The idea is that they are all given an assignment question - which is similar to an essay question - and they are asked to discuss the question as a group.

## Developmental Issues

### The impetus for the development

Stuart and I started working on this form of assessment six years ago. The impetus for it was partly that we wanted to develop the students' computer skills but it was also because the form of assessment we were using at that time no longer seemed to be working.

### The aims

Our subject, social psychology, is about the relationship between the individual and the group, and from the perspective of social psychology knowledge is something which is constructed through group interaction. There is also evidence to suggest that collaborative work promotes deep learning and that weaker students are improved through interactions with stronger ones. For these kinds of reasons we favoured collaborative working and had being getting students

to do conventional group projects: given a topic, research it as a group and submit a written group project. How many people have done this kind of thing? If so, you probably know the kinds of problems with it - not least the in-group disputes about who has or hasn't done what. These were irritating but worse was the declining quality of the work and the unknowable problem of how much actual collaboration there had been. At best it seemed the students might have met to divvy up the work. At worst chapters of the project would be handed in separately and seemed to bear no relation to each other- other than the number of the group of which they claimed to be part. It was obvious that in part these problems were getting worse because of changes taking place within the university. We had come through a period of rapid expansion when we had gone from around 30 students on the module to over 200. This had put pressure on resources: the time we could give to the students and space where they could work in groups. Student lives were also changing and many more were now fitting their study around work or home commitments and didn't have time to hang around waiting to meet up with other group members.

### The story of the process

FirstClass Conferencing seemed to be the solution to all these problems (at that time). First the use of web-based electronic conferencing systems is not constrained by time or location - students could individually take part in group discussions at any time and from anywhere where they had access to a computer with an internet link. For these reasons, we thought, we would also be able to use our time more effectively and make ourselves virtual members of each group making interventions when we thought it was appropriate or necessary. Possibly more importantly, the process of collaboration would be made visible to us -we would actually be able to see who had or hadn't done what! This is because not only could we read the messages within each group but we could also check the history of the messages.

### Obstacles and means of overcoming

The first year we were naive. We assumed, I suppose because we were used to having academic discussions using e-mail or electronic bulletin boards, that we only had to train the students in the technological aspects of the FirstClass System: how to send and read messages etc and they would know what to do! This wasn't the case. Assessment always causes anxiety but that year I had never known such anxiety! By coincidence, I was videoing a number of the seminars that year for reasons unconnected with electronic conferencing and it was noticeable that ten or fifteen minutes of every seminar were taken up with questions about the assessment; and that if the tutor left the students to have discussion on their own, it was always their worries about the assessment that they discussed rather than the seminar topic (or even football or Eastenders!).

The next problem was also one of naiveté: keeping track of the workings of the groups was incredibly time consuming and on the whole we refrained from intervening in discussions because it seemed unfair to intervene in some and not others - and there was no way we could play an active part in all of them.

Finally the outcomes were no better (possibly even worse) than the conventional group projects that we had received the year previously. The bulk of messages were about meeting or failing to up outside the library or in the refectory, some messages were reports on what had taken place in these meetings - Emma is going to do an essay on prejudice and Matt is going to look for books on aggression etc, a few messages were **essays** on prejudice, aggression etc, one or two were just huge chunks of text downloaded from the internet without editing, comment or references. There was nothing that resembled group discussion of the assignment question.

## Outcomes

### Personal learning/outcomes

So, you might think that this is the story of a disaster, but, of course, we learned a lot from this experience. Each year since we have we have reflected on what has happened in the previous year and have adjusted our practices.

The two major changes that we have made have actually had nothing to do with the technology because that works fine - it was our application that was wrong.

First, I have considerably changed the induction workshops that I run for students coming onto the module. At the beginning I focused on the technical aspects of using the software, now I focus on communication and interaction. I already have the groups set up and I get the students to use the system to 'socialise' ie introduce themselves, exchange favourite websites, make arrangements to meet, etc. In the course of this I introduce some refinements like the idea of 'threading' messages; and demonstrate the confidentiality of their group discussions from other students while pointing out that, for me, it is a 'surveillance' system - I can know when they sent messages, whether they have read others messages and when etc.

But this would have been more difficult to do at the beginning because Stuart and I were the only people using FirstClass and the system was strange to our new students. So at that time I had to focus on the technology. Now the system is widely used by staff and students especially for the posting of lecture notes. First year students are introduced to the system in the induction period and find it very useful - not only for getting lecture notes. Goods are traded by students on the system and I've notice there's quite a lot of 'chatting up' goes on as well - so by the time the students come to me in the second year they have usually discovered most of the technical things they need to know for other purposes.

Secondly, we provide the students with a structure for their discussion, now. That is we not only divide them into groups but we number the members of the group and we give them a set of deadlines. By the first deadline group member one has to have sent a short message outlining one perspective on the question, by the second group members 2,3, and 4 have to have sent short messages commenting on this message, by the third group member number two has to outline a different perspective etc. until everyone has sent one 'lead' message and 3 replies.

We are still working on this. For example, this year, because of a change in the structure of the degree programme, we have suddenly gone from having over 200 students on the module to a mere 20. This has provided me with the opportunity to be a participant in each group and I shall be very interested in the outcome of this because there is a lot of research to suggest that this is a significant factor in the success of such group discussions.

Students are now no more anxious about this assessment than they are about more conventional forms, I think, and we don't have the complaints about group work that we used to have. At the beginning of the year I am often asked, "Why do I have to do this?" and told that it would be so much easier to do an essay. But by the end of the year many students tell me they thought it was good and that they have gained from it - not least because it forces them to do a little often, rather than having a mad panic of essay writing and revision at the end. That has to be good.

The work that the students do still doesn't meet the ideal of 'academic' discussion that I fantasise about but then neither does the work that they do in face-to-face seminars.
If I were to sum up what I had learned from this it is the relative insignificance of technology within the greater scheme of things. It is definitely not the cure-all that it has sometimes been promoted as - see Dearing for example. It won't transform students or reduce our teaching load. It is actually just another teaching tool - one that has some benefits and opportunities but it can't be divorced from the social environment in which it is used. Or as I heard someone say the other day: *you have to take people with the technology but you also have to take the technology along with the people*. I think that what we have done with FirstClass has enabled students to work more flexibly, it has given them valuable skills that they couldn't get in other ways, it has encouraged good study habits, and, after a brief resistance, our students do actually enjoy it enough to come back for more in their 3rd year. And I think that's pretty good.