

Networked learning 2002: The third international conference – Sheffield 26 – 28 March 2002

This conference brought together a range of researchers and practitioners who are involved in developing networked learning which makes use of modern technologies. The main focus was on the use of the internet but other technologies were also considered. It was interdisciplinary in terms of subject areas represented – with the key focus on how the online environment can be used in teaching and learning.

The conference included a wide range of papers of which it was only possible to sample a small number! The standard of papers was generally higher than at the last networked conference (Lancaster 2000).

There were two main areas that were strongly represented at the conference:

1. Analysis of discourse online
2. The development of online communities

In the first category there were a range of papers – one symposium presented papers by Vic Lally and Maarten de Laat. These were interesting in that they considered the methodological problems in relation to analysing online discourse. Three related papers were presented and they used three different ways of analysing data: **computer assisted content analysis** (Lally, V. & de Laat, M. Deciphering individual learning processes in virtual professional development), **social network analysis** (de Laat, M. Network and content analysis in an online community discourse) and **critical event recall** (Lally, V. Squaring the circle: triangulating content and social network analysis with critical event recall). These papers would provide a good basis for considering methodology in relation to research in UHI into processes of learning in online modules.

In the second category there was a symposium of six papers (rather too many for the amount of time given!) led by David McConnell. The first paper in this symposium explored the development of communities in a European internet school. It used the SOLO taxonomy to explore students' interactions online. What was of particular interest here was that this was a module developed jointly by three institutions in different countries (UK, Sweden and Belgium) and students (occupational therapy) worked in cross national groups on one module. Their interactions were explored using the SOLO taxonomy. One interesting point made was that as the students progressed through the module they did demonstrate progress to higher levels in the SOLO taxonomy; however, the initial data analysis did not seem to support this. The students' communications over time increased and then seemed to decrease (indicating a lower level in the taxonomy); however, further analysis indicated that this was not the case. The students' ability to understand each other increased and this allowed for more 'condensed' communication – at a higher level.

There were further papers here which focused closely on the development of communities online with the Sheffield M.Ed. in e-learning being used as a case study. This particular paper commented on the potential changes in the tutor role as this course moved from being mainly online but with initial face to face meetings to being fully online. The fully online format possibly requires a higher level of structure and may also change the role of the tutor into more of a tutor rather than a 'co-learner'. Some interesting issues were explored as a result of this paper in terms of how and when a tutor should intervene in the learning process, also considered was the fact that non-intervention does not necessarily mean lack of presence and involvement.

Frans Ronteltap's presentation explained the set up at Maastricht University which was a new university set up with the aim of being innovative and to use problem based learning. The growth in student numbers has put pressure on the earlier ways of delivering the curriculum and this has led to the development of a number of tools in the online learning environment. One such tool - Polaris - was demonstrated. This tool basically acts as a way of organising different aspects of the learning in the online environment, for example, instead of having to respond in writing to a particular argument presented a tick can be used. When this is used by several students it becomes easy to look at level of agreement within a group - this removes the need for each person to type in a response and saves space. This is only one example explained by a fairly computer illiterate person - anyone interested should read Ronteltap's paper!

This is a snapshot of some of the presentations. The papers presented are all contained in the Conference proceedings and abstracts are available online at:

The conference has left me with two main issues to ponder on and to explore further:

1. Research into online discussions is developing fast and there were some interesting examples of useful methodology and some interesting discussion by people who are heavily involved in this kind of research. However, the focus is on online group discussions. This type of data is relatively easily collected - but this does not necessarily mean that it is the most important way that students communicate when undertaking an online module. The role of email and other means (e.g. telephone, video-conferencing) of communication should perhaps be more clearly recognised and explored by researchers.
2. The role of the tutor in online courses. To what extent can this be as 'fellow learner' and to what extent should it be as a tutor with a role to 'lead' or steer the group. This issue was particularly prominent in David McConnell's presentation and, as the role of the tutor is likely to be different in online rather than face to face tutorials it is one that should also be considered in greater depth. At the moment a lot of the focus is (rightly) on the student experience.