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A Learning Community on the Internet: Some Lessons from Using the Web

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Background

The starting point for this paper is the case study exercise, carried out by postgraduate students in different countries, described in Hacker et al (1996) and Rich (1997). This exercise used electronic mail as the principal method of communication, although there it was reflected in the evaluation of the exercise that e-mail was losing its attraction as a novel technology to use. Since the above papers were written, some work has been carried out to adapt the exercise to using the world-wide web, and this paper examines some lessons from the experience. It also places these lessons in the context of current ideas about the future of higher education, especially in Britain.

To recap the background, the exercise uses a case study about an instance of possible sexual harassment in a bank in California. This case was chosen as being topical, and also as being a case where different viewpoints would prevail in different countries. Students from Britain, France, on occasions two different parts of the US, and on one occasion Finland, entered an open discussion of their views of the case. Particularly they were asked to discuss whether there might be grounds for accusations of sexual harassment, and the reasons for their decision.

The staff organising the case study occasionally made contributions to the mailing list, for example:

- To raise particular questions which arose from the discussion
- To draw attention to topical issues, and sometimes to quote relevant articles from the press
- To avoid the discussion from deviating too dramatically from its intended course
- To put forward the view of one or other of the characters described in the case.

Different sets of participants approached the case in different ways. The approach chosen for the British students was influenced by a need to encourage teamwork and reflection as part of the learning process. So the students taking part in the case study worked in a number of teams. Each team was asked to look at a particular aspect of the case, or the discourse, while its members contributed to the open discussion. Examples of topics that the teams would look at were:

- International differences: how different would the case be in a different country?
- Information and knowledge in the case: how much was information being used as a source of power by the characters in the case?
- Using the electronic network for discussion: how different would the discussion have been had it taken place face-to-face?

At the end of the exercise the teams were asked to present their findings, on their particular topics, to the whole UK-based cohort of students.

This worked well because it involved the students in a form of action research, by analysing their own use of the Internet, and because it added some tangible value to a course that was primarily taught face-to-face.

Progress after 1997

In 1997 the use of a web conferencing system, as an alternative to electronic mail, appeared an attractive approach. A number of tools available in the public domain were investigated, including COW (Klavins, 1996) and WWWboard (Wright, 1995). These both adopted the approach of providing scripts which could be loaded onto a university’s web server. An alternative, which placed less of a requirement on users to install their own web conferencing system, was to use a public access system such as Internet Classroom Assistant, or ICA (Nicenet 1997), and the first attempt to use web conferencing for the case study used this approach. ICA allows any user to visit a web site and to set up a discussion forum of their choice. A further advantage of this approach was that it overcame any resistance from the administrative departments in the various universities, responsible for providing the computing infrastructure.

Unfortunately this approach did not work well for the students based in London. There were serious problems in using ICA because of the interaction of the proxy and cache servers, used to connect the UK academic community to the rest of the Internet, and ICA. Technically these were not insuperable, but they would have required more resources than either the university or Nicenet, a non-profit organisation, was able to devote to the exercise. Although the London-based students were able to observe the discussion, their active participation was very limited.

In the succeeding year, a different technology was used, and again there was some difficulty in involving the students based in London. This time the difficulty was pedagogic, not technical. The students’ syllabus had
expanded and now included a further exercise which used the world wide web. The Internet-based case study became a less important part of the course than it had been before, and in particular the group presentations had to be dropped from the course. Students were still invited to join in the discussion, but none took the opportunity. McConnell (1991) described a management learning exercise where computer conferencing was an integral part of the students’ assessment. It appears that the need to include an exercise in the assessment, if students are to participate, still applies.

Therefore in two successive years a web-based version of the case had not been widely used by students. While there were (different) external reasons for this in each year, the effect of this is that there is little evidence to support the use of the case with a web discussion. So it is an appropriate time to review the educational context and the fundamental reasons for using the case.

Why Use an Internet Case Study?

Two fundamental ideas underlie the original decision to use an Internet based case study. These ideas could be developed into hypotheses about where new technology can be used to assist face-to-face study:

- The technology needs to add value to the course in a tangible way, not possible without using new technology (in this example, by adding an international dimension)
- Electronic media such as the world-wide web should only be used where both pedagogic and technical prerequisites, which can be identified are in place. Without these, other more traditional media may be more appropriate.

Much of the work carried out in the use of technology in education addresses areas, such as distance education, where there are clear outcomes which can only be reached using new technology. Hiltz (1997) is optimistic about the scope for use of asynchronous learning networks – of which the e-mail list used here is one. Significantly, she warns against the idea that the use of asynchronous networks is a cheap approach to delivering education.

The Context Within Higher Education

In Britain, recent policy decisions in higher education have been influenced by a major national report into the future of the sector (Dearing, 1997). There is much in this report on the application of information and communication technology. Some of it is to do with cutting the costs of delivering learning to a large number of students. But new technology is also seen as a way in which new technology can expand the scope of higher education. This is more than an argument for distance education: it means that education could become more inclusive by allowing university-based students access to resources outside the hours they spend at the university, and it also means that UK universities need to compete in a global market. Kobrin (1998) describes how this global market affects people in employment, and business schools in particular need to prepare their students for such an environment.

There are also trends in educational thought, which Dearing alludes to, which emphasise the importance of collaborative work, and technology as a tool for collaborative work. Moll et al (1993) develop Salomon’s concept of learning as a distributed process between different people, with some interaction which could be fostered by new networks. Use and discussion of a case study encourages reflection among the students. It is not only educationalists who favour reflection as part of learning; Plender (1997) puts forward a series of ideas about stakeholding that have attracted attention from political thinkers of various convictions. These ideas, which aim to avoid excessive short-term thinking, especially in business, depend partly on fostering a culture of collaborative learning.

Sandbothe (1998) puts the use of new networks for learning into a philosophical context, and suggests that time will become less important in the future as a characteristic of the learning experience. This works in favour of new technology, but perhaps not in favour of a case discussion which is very dependent on a sequence of topics being raised over a certain period of time.

Thoughts for the Future

The conditions, then, are still very favourable for running a case using an electronic network. The case still adds tangible value, and the international dimension is perhaps more topical than ever. Furthermore the MBA students, who were the first UK participants in the case, are still active users of the web for learning, notably by putting some of their own findings into a database which is accessible over the web, as shown in the screen example below. The unsuccessful web discussions were hampered by specific problems to do with the technological and pedagogic environments.
However, it has become difficult to separate the technical environment and the pedagogic environment. When the case was initially introduced, the technical environment implied the need to provide sufficient training in using e-mail. Now the technology is more embedded in the students’ experience. Few need any training in using the Internet or PCs specifically for this exercise. But the greater familiarity of the technology has also added to the expectations that students have.

Nevertheless, it is as difficult to transfer an exercise from one medium to another as it is to transfer from paper to electronic media. There is a paradox that the case study, in its web version, only looks a failure, so far, from the British side and so to categorise it as a failure is really an example of lacking understanding of other cultures’ experiences. This is exactly what the case study set out to avoid, and now it is being repeated with a different set of (undergraduate) students.

One more reflection on the conclusions drawn in 1997. At that time it appeared that electronic mail failed to arouse interest among the students, whereas the web seemed novel and attractive. Now the web has become such a familiar part of the students’ lives that pure web browsing – that is, simply looking through pages without providing any input – also lacks excitement. A sign of this is that the proportion of students with their own Internet access, independently of the university, increased from 35% in 1996 to 95% in 1998. Both of these figures were based on polls take when students first registered, and anecdotal evidence is that the proportion with Internet access increases during the year.

Conversely the idea of following a case study discussion, with students elsewhere in the world, over some time still has an attraction in its own right. But also, the simple browsing model (you pull information out of the web rather than having it pushed at you by e-mail) is very important in building a critical mass of use of a network. But the evidence of commercial web sites is that some more interactive communication is necessary to sustain use of the web. So e-mail, as an interactive medium, might actually be more appropriate for this discussion. In fact Netscape’s ‘Collabra’ approach, which is now being used for the case study, is based on a Usenet newsgroups – a longer-established technology than the web, although the discussion can be reached through a web page by most users.

References: