

Online Tutorial Asynchronous Workshop

(A time bound, tutor facilitated non real-time workshop)

On the Abacus ISM (Institute of Supervision & Management) Online Trainers Course, we have always started the course with a face-to-face (f2f) meeting. This practice has been used to give short 'hands on' sessions with the software we use (FirstClass) and to permit the course participants to meet and get to know each other. We also use these sessions to start the group formation process, prior to conducting the 10 week asynchronous online Computer Supported Co-operative Learning (CSCL) element of the course. We normally hold the course with a final face-to-face meeting after the 10-week online modules. This is where we review the aims and objectives of the course, discuss what learning took place and have participants give a short presentation of their course project.

On a number of occasions, course participants are unable to attend these face-to-face sessions, due the traveling distances involved or because of other commitments. On the initial face-to-face, this can be an asset, as we can get the course participants to examine what difference meeting or not meeting some of their colleagues made to their online communication processes. This usually allows the tutor to facilitate a useful discussion on the need to have face-to-face sessions and what extra benefits might result in undertaking these events.

Course participants always looked forward to the final face-to-face meeting, as it allows them to meet their 'online' colleagues and discuss their various online experiences. Often, however, unplanned work or family commitments occur that prevent one or two students attending. In the past we have sometimes posted a brief account of the final face-to-face proceedings to these course participants.

On a recent course, I discovered that, for various reasons, none of the participants could travel to a central location in order to attend their course final face-to-face day. One participant was at a conference in Scotland, others were in Northern Ireland, whilst I was located in the west of England.

I decided to try and achieve a similar set of outcomes by holding an online asynchronous tutorial workshop. By this I mean a time bound, tutor facilitated non real-time meeting. The asynchronous nature of these sessions permits participants a greater chance to give reflective responses and help to reduce the connection costs. (In the UK most local telephone connections to the Internet are charged for!). It also holds less fear for those participants who have limited keyboard skills or who have a slow typing rate. The synchronous 'chat' facility disadvantages such participants, with a resulting drop in the level of motivation to contribute.

I canvassed the participants to ensure that everyone could participate, at least for part of the session. I planned the event prior to the day, just as I would for a face-to-face learning session.

A few days prior to the day, I posted the proposed schedule of events. I was careful not to attach times to the proposed activities, as I was unsure about the time needed to achieve active participation by all the participants. My original message is show: -

Hi All,

My intention is to cover the programme below!

If you have areas that you also want to discuss then please use the 'Reply with quotes' function and add your subject(s) to my list below. My intention is that we all log in between 9am and 9.15am. I will set a task and you should then respond over the next 5 minutes. Log back in and post your response, downloading the responses of others. I would ask you to log in regularly (every 10 or 15 minutes)

Please remind me about breaks (for coffee/tea/lunch).

When we feel that we have covered a topic sufficiently we can then move on.

Assemble & Introduction to the Day

Hopes, Fear and Expectations Revisited

(It would be handy if you could post a copy of your original hopes Fears and expectations.)

We will then address each of these areas separately.

Aims and Objectives Revisited

Group Discussion "What have I learned?"

What have I learned?

How am I likely to use the knowledge gained?

What additional information or skills do I need?

How do I get them?

Where to from here?

Personal Projects

I will be asking you to give a very brief description of your project (subject and how you intend delivering it and what further help you will need)

In Groups Develop Tips for Students

Your Thoughts on the course

Quality Survey

Abacus Alumni Area

Close

I am looking forward to seeing how this works.

Gerry P

On the day, the activity started a little slowly, with participants first logging in, between 8.36 am and 10.10 am. (One of the participants was at a conference in Scotland and had to attend the opening session!)

I started the day with the following activity, which was posted at 8.51am: -

"Hi All,

Welcome to the first ever 'online module 5! I hope we can get some good participation out of this today! Let's see how it goes. Has anyone got any problems about today that you wish me to know about?

Otherwise!

The first area I want to look at is your original hopes!

"Hopes

Understand issues related to online learning

Both tutor and student perception

Gain confidence in the application and skills

Interaction as effective as f2f learning

Something practical

Learn the skills to sell it on

Enjoy it

"

What I would ask each of you to do is to: -

Think about what your original hopes were

Then

*Contribute: Which of them **were realized/not realized** and your feelings about these now.*

Post your message

Log back in 5 minutes later and comment on anything that someone else has said.

Gerry P "

Initially, the participants spend some time, acknowledging their presence on the system and socializing with their colleagues ("Good to see you online", " what is the weather like in?").

I believe that this is an important aspect of such an event, and whilst I did not plan for it, I realized that it was important to let this social aspect take place. This took almost an hour, which I had not planned for!

The first of the contribution to my question (shown above) was posted at 9.43 am. The next contribution was posted at 9.49 am A number of other contribution then followed.

At 9.48 am I posted a second activity (on a review of the participants' original fears). We now had two separate items under discussion going at once. This is very difficult to undertake in a face-to-face session with the same participants! During the day, I found that I was able to run up to three different discussions simultaneously, in an effective manner.

The pace of participants posting contributions quickened considerably, as the morning went on. I decided to introduce a number of short breaks. Even with these, one of the participants posted the following message, at 11.27 a.m.: -

"Folks

My eyes are getting a little sore. I'm going to take a break while I consider the AIMS of the course. Back at 12.45"

I then called a break with the following message: -

*"Pat is correct. We need to have a break! I will post another message about the Aims. Can we now round of the Hopes fear & expectations discussion!
I am very pleased that you all managed to get in. I know that it has taken some real effort on your part.*

See you between 12.30 and 1 p.m.

Gerry P"

Some participants used this 'down' time to catch up and post more contributions. Others took a much-needed break. As the tutor, I use the time to review the progress made and to consider what I could hope to achieve after we resumed. I realized that we would not be able to cover my entire original programme.

The participants then started to log in and we again have an intense period of asynchronous discussion. By 3.15 p.m., I was feeling extremely tired and I became aware that others felt the same. The following message: -

“Has anyone else noticed how our style has become a lot more relaxed since we came on line early this morning?”

I think it has a lot to do with us getting tired - it really takes it out of you communicating with five others on-line all morning”

Amongst the responses this message generated was the follow: -

“ Me too, I thought we were logging in at set times, I have to admit my eyes are struggling as is my brain! ”

At this stage, the average number of contributions posted by each participant was just over 46. Many of these were two or three line responses, but a substantial number were at over 10 lines long and contributed some excellent learning points to the group. As a result of the above messages and my own tired condition, at 3.31 p.m. I posted the following message: -

*“I think you have all worked hard and I am worried about information overload. I am going to suggest that we treat the above exercise as this week’s task. Pat can I ask you to Summarise it for Wednesday Week? I will post other issues over the next few days. Are You Happy with this?
Thanks*

Gerry P ”

Everyone agreed that they had enjoyed the session and were now felt that they had reached the stage where they felt they needed to call a halt. I suggested that the participants might like to discuss some of the outstanding issues over the next 7 days, ‘online’ (the normal way that we conduct our computer supported co-operative learning). They all agreed seemed keen to do so.

I also asked the participants about their feeling towards the online tutorial asynchronous workshop that they had just experienced. As they were tired, I suggesting that they allow a few days to elapse before they responded, in order to permit sufficient time to reflect. Below, I have shown my questions (**in Bold**) with a selection of the participants’ answers: -

“What went well?”

“Everyone participated fully and amazingly, we all managed to keep up with what was going on.”

“I could not agree more this exercise really focused the mind”

“What did you like about it?”

“It generated a feeling of camaraderie - great teamwork. We were all working together to achieve the same goals. Our wonderful, witty sense of humour still shone through :-)”

“An enjoyable day - as Arthur said we must lead a sad life :-)”

“I enjoyed it too and good a lot of confidence from the achievement of something a bit different. I also explored the challenges of having to do so well away from base.”

What did not go so well?

“It took a while to get going as we didn't all start at the same time. This could have been difficult for latecomers. “

“By 8.00 p.m. last night I was beyond feeling Pat!!!!!!”

How could it be improved?

“With more forward planning we could have chosen a day that better suited all participants. Also - what happened to the 'little and often' principle? It definitely needed to be divided up into smaller chunks.”

“Pat, I would have to agree with you, I thought we were only going to long on about six times I feel as if I have been here all day. While I am typing something I go back out and there is a list of messages waiting for me. However, in saying all that I must say it is good experience and I am enjoying it.”

Would you try and run a similar session (almost synchronous!) on some of your courses?

“Yes - though I would keep it a lot shorter.”

“My view - yes we do need a substantial surge of this sort, and yes, it might be better in two sessions a day or so apart.”

What are the advantages of this type of event?

“Total involvement.

Motivation.

No travel costs (though definitely no saving on time).”

What are the disadvantages?

“Sore eyes.

Mentally exhausting - much to my surprise

- these can be avoided by little and often.

Constant interruptions by colleagues, phones, etc. (can be avoided with better planning)”

As all the participants are experienced lecturers or trainers, they were in a position to compare the learning value of the online asynchronous workshop, with conventional workshops they had run. They all agreed that they would run a similar event in the future, with some modifications.

The main learning points I learned from this experimental workshop have been: -

- Workshops should not be run for more than about 2 hours 30 minutes.
- Group size is vital – groups need to be no smaller than 4 (insufficient interaction) and no larger than 6 (Information overload inevitable!)
- A tutor is unlikely to be able to handle more than 2 such groups because of the mental demands needed to facilitate such groups.
- A clear pre event briefing needs to be published ‘online’ in sufficient time to allow participants to question or add to the proposed events.
- Time needed to accomplish fruitful discussion online is considerably longer, than for a similar face-to-face workshop.
- A need to allow for online socialization to occur at the start of the event.
- This type of activity needs participants who are experienced in ‘online’ asynchronous communication. I would not use it in the early part of any ‘online’ course, for this reason.
- This activity appears to add to student motivation.

This workshop was an experiment, born out of necessity! It was conceived to cope with the problem of course participants not being able to attend a central location, which is now becoming the norm, with many more of our

course participants communication across Trans continental distances. I intend to incorporate the point learned, during this experiment. I will run similar online asynchronous workshops on many other occasions, in future

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