

## Chapter 16. Reflections on the Use of Computer-mediated-Communication by Post-graduate Health Services Management Students Studying by Distance Education

---

Participant: David Ritchie, Charles Sturt University

Mentor: John Bain, Griffith University

I was a new member of ASCILITE and had become involved because of my early involvement with the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in my own distance education subjects. Charles Sturt University (CSU) had commenced trials in evaluating the use of different forms of CMC in 1997. I was undertaking a major revision of a post graduate distance education subject and had began exploring the possibilities with an educational designer in a prototype form. The University subsequently adopted an institution wide approach incorporating computer-mediated communication (CMC) into every distance education subject, some 1600 offered each session, in early 2000. The CMC used was in-house developed bulletin board software described as a “forum”, that was password accessed via an electronic subject template. There had been wide variation in the usage of CMC across these subjects. Oliver (1999) described critical design elements for effective on-line learning environments - content, learner supports and learning activities, but the balance of these in specific subjects clearly remains challenging. The direct transfer of traditional print-based distance education material into an electronic format is unlikely to be immediately successful without a consideration of these issues. A better understanding of the use of CMC in this specific context, progressing beyond description into an assessment of learning outcomes, was the intended outcome of the evaluation proposed.

A “relatively” high level of forum activity had been observed in this subject compared to the broader CSU online environment experience on a per capita basis, and a better understanding about what was generating and sustaining that activity was required. I had my own ideas about the design of the subject and its assessment activities but I felt it important to gain an understanding of the student experience of that. I managed to convince

others as well in accepting my submission for participation in the ASCILITE CUTSD Project. Assessment in the subject had already incorporated a reflective journal. With the introduction of CMC I expected that the reflective journal would be used to develop reflective thinking privately, while the CMC could be used to test ideas publicly. CMC would be used by students articulating their own positions and being expected to defend their views while also able to challenge the views of others. Rather than just discuss issues of interest it was expected that the forum would demonstrate a development of reflective practice individually as well as communally. There are issues about the specific nature of the reflective practice expected that differentiate this approach from other studies, but the details are not presented in this commentary.

The level of forum activity observed lead to a number of questions relating to the quality of interaction. Questions such as, what sort of communication had been established between the forum participants? How had it been sustained? What evidence of reflective practice could be identified in the postings? In what way did the CMC contribute to the development of reflective practice?

A review of the literature indicated that reflective practice was widely used in a number of pre-service programs, especially in nursing and teaching, but also in architecture, engineering, and music. Most of those studies had been conducted in face to face situations related to practical experience or in master class situations. There were few studies in distance education, and most of those tended to be quantitative, focusing on patterns of CMC activity rather than qualitative assessment. This augured well it appeared for the intended evaluation.

A crude and subjective approach to assessment of the reflective journals had been used during the development of the new version of the subject but I wanted and expected to improve that with the use of CMC. Several studies were identified that had presented or evaluated different coding scales and I assumed that I would be able to use a generic form in this study. My mentor agreed with the broad principles of the basis for the proposed evaluation but did express a number of concerns about this element of the evaluation. At the time I didn't appreciate or realise just how big an issue this would become. I was observing increased forum activity as the academic session proceeded, and different patterns to those I had observed previously. I thought everything was falling into place.

Having near perfect hindsight a number of fundamental mistakes were made. The most important question was "In what way did the CMC contribute to the development of reflective practice?" To answer that, there needed to be an ability to confirm reflective thinking had occurred, and there needed to be a link between CMC and the journal. In the end, although students had been requested to use a chronological sequence and to date journal entries, only two date-logged their reflective journal. Others presented assignments that were structured by subject topic and were written as topic summaries rather than as a journal should be. This problem was addressed in later versions of the subject, but did nothing to further the evaluation proposed. The main offering of the subject was in the first academic session and while the evaluation intended failed in this first attempt it has shaped subsequent offerings of the subject and the method of evaluation.

The second problem remained the vexed question of determining reflective thinking, and the levels or types involved. To date this has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. There are differences in the approach required in this subject, and further research into the literature has identified new directions of potential development. It appears likely that a specific coding approach will need to be developed and I have some views on that.

I have subsequently had my PhD proposal accepted "Promoting reflective thinking using selected materials, journalling and CMC in a distance education health services management

subject: A case study." My involvement in this ASCILITE CUTSD project was not successful or conclusive in achieving my intended goals but it has influenced my thinking and the development of an appropriate method. Active forum participation has increased from 12.5% to 46% in the latest offering of the subject, the number of postings have doubled, and the number of threads has increased. The ease of counting and describing patterns remains but the goal of qualitatively evaluating learning outcomes is elusive. I am confident that I am closer to being able to achieve that, and this project has influenced that.

The support offered by the ASCILITE team responsible for developing the CUTSD submission, and particularly my ever patient Mentor, Professor John Bain, was very much appreciated. I gained much from the experience. Needless to say the failings are my own.