

A FOOT IN THE WORLD OF IDEAS: GRADUATE STUDY THROUGH THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

This case study is an exploratory investigation of the learning opportunities provided by a Web-based Master of Science program in TESOL. The paper begins with a description of the course and its components. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the potential of the Web for delivering graduate level programs. A secondary purpose is to compare this delivery with both classroom-based and traditional distance learning delivery modes. Data for the paper include transcripts from tutorials conducted through a chat line as well as data provided by students in interviews. Patterns in the data were identified through a grounded procedure in which themes and issues emerged from the data through an interactive process of analysis and tentative category assignment. During the course of the analysis, the following four main themes emerged: the context of learning, the discourse of synchronous interaction, student control of the learning process, and the evolving culture of the virtual classroom. These are described and discussed in the body of the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web has attracted the attention of people around the world, including educators and trainers. Despite all the interest, little research evidence exists to support claims for the effectiveness of Web-based instruction (WBI). Before collecting such evidence, it is essential to define the dimensions of interactive learning that can be enabled via the World Wide Web. Further, an analysis of the critical dimensions of WBI is required to guide program development, implementation and evaluation. (Reeves & Reeves, 1996, p. 59) There has been an explosion in the use of the World Wide Web for a range of educational purposes, from individual instructors placing assignments on a Web page to virtual universities such as the [Western Governors University](#) offering courses and degrees entirely via the Internet. However, there are relatively few accounts of the use of Web-based instruction (WBI) for the design and delivery of formal courses of instruction. This interpretive case study describes and evaluates the use of Internet technology for the delivery of a Masters program in TESOL. It looks at the nature of the learning experiences offered by a Web-based Masters program, and draw comparisons between this program, face-to-face instruction, and distance programs that do not offer the opportunities for student-student and student-professor communication afforded by WBI. Given the contexts in which many EFL teachers operate, often remote from formal instructional opportunities, the potential for WBI is great. However, it is important for new forms of program delivery to be described and analyzed (Hill, 1997, p. 79; Schrum, 1992). It is the purpose of this article to contribute to both description and analysis, focusing in particular on the discourse of synchronous communication.

A similar situation exists at present in relation to WBI, as existed some years ago in relation to CALL (Chapelle, 1990). As with CALL, the field needs to understand how WBI can be best exploited for the effective delivery of education at a distance. At this point in the development of the medium, what is needed are descriptive and interpretive accounts of programs that are utilizing the Web for the administration and delivery of their programs.

In a recent investigation into the virtual classroom, Hiltz (1995, p. 103) asked a group of executives, all of whom had experienced online teaching, what made a "good" online course. Responses indicated that good classes promoted interaction (rather than "input" from the professor), were conducted by a professor who

was responsive and dealt directly (and briefly) with students' questions rather than sticking to the script, and had a climate in which all students were encouraged to respond. In the field of second language teacher education, while some accounts of the use of information technology in general, and WBI in particular, are beginning to appear (e.g., Bruce, 1998; Neufeld, 1997; Warschauer, 1995a, 1995b), there is comparatively little in the way of data-based reports of the discourse of Web-based instruction.¹

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the use of Web-based instruction (WBI) for the delivery of a distance Masters program in TESOL. The opportunity to carry out the study came about when a cohort of students who had studied in regular as well as traditional distance mode, undertook one of the courses in a new Web-based graduate program in TESOL offered by Newport Asia-Pacific University. *Traditional* is used in this paper to refer to distance programs delivered through print media. For an elaborated definition of and guidelines for distance education via the Internet, see <http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distgln.html>. The cohort consisted of four native speakers of English and one native speaker of Japanese. Data for the study came from transcripts of interactive classes conducted through a chat line that is part of the University Web. In all, approximately 15 hours of interaction were collected and analyzed over an eight week period. Additional data were provided by students who were asked to reflect on and evaluate the program twice during the course.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The investigation took the form of an exploratory case study. A case is defined in the literature as a "bounded instance" (Stake, 1988) that investigates phenomena within the real-life contexts in which they occur (Yin, 1984). In this study, the bounded instance was a cohort of students completing an eight week Web-mediated graduate course as part of a Master of Science degree in TESOL. The case study approach was adopted given the necessarily exploratory nature of the research. The aim of the study was to generate insights rather than to test hypotheses, although I would also argue that it is legitimate to draw conclusions and generalizations about the case rather than from it (Adelman, Jenkins, & Kemmis, 1976, p. 40). In keeping with recent approaches to case study in educational research, this study is particularistic and descriptive, adopts an heuristic approach to the data, and relies heavily on inductive reasoning (Merriam, 1988, p. 162).

The researcher was also the professor on the course. Motivations as a researcher led to documenting, interpreting, and understanding forms of program delivery that were new to me and my students. The motivation as a teacher to collect data was to improve the course. (For a discussion and rationale of the notion of "teacher-researcher," see Freeman, 1998.) Studies such as the one presented here have the potential to address the gap between theory and practice that has been noted by Clark (1994) and van Lier (1988) among others.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Newport Asia-Pacific University is a recently established school offering Web-based graduate level instruction (WBI) in the areas of TESOL, the teaching of Japanese as a Second Language, intercultural communication, and business administration. Web-based Instruction (WBI) is a form of teaching that utilizes the World Wide Web to carry out some or all of the functions that are traditionally performed through other media such as print, face-to-face communication, and the use of telephone and fax. Khan (1997) says, "Web-based Instruction (WBI) can be viewed as an innovative approach for delivering instruction to a remote audience, using the Web as the medium." (p. 5)

Through the Newport Asia-Pacific University's Web site (<http://www.asiapacificu.edu>), students are able to

- Download course guides, assignments, and supplementary materials

- Take part in interactive classes through a chat line
- Exchange ideas, papers, and assignments through a bulletin board
- Communicate with other students in their cohort through listservs (called the Student Conference Center)
- Submit assignments and receive feedback on assignments
- Access the library and bookstore through which they can purchase texts access information such as term dates, scholarships, and so forth.

Asynchronous interactions occurred through regular e-mail interactions between students through the TESOL Student Conference Center. This is a listserv that provides academic support for students enrolled in the degree program. In order for the lists to be beneficial, NAPU requires its students to be participants, not merely observers, and accomplishes this through the *host system*. Each week, a different student is appointed as "Student Host" and leads discussion of tutorial questions and assignments that are set out in their course materials, as well as topics discussed in the weekly classroom sessions. Part of a student's grade comes from his or her involvement in posting and responding to messages through the Student Conference Center.

It is within the context of this virtual university that the NAPU Master of Science in TESOL is offered. The degree program consists of 10 courses and a dissertation. Eight of the courses are studied at a distance, and employ Web-based forms of delivery and interaction, as well as more traditional means such as textbooks and journal readings. The WBI is described more fully below. Two of the courses are delivered in intensive residential mode.

Each course consists of eight units, and each unit takes a week to complete. The units consist of the following elements:

- A study guide
- Set texts and additional readings
- Tutorial questions and tasks
- Weekly assignments
- A weekly interactive class
- A Student Conference Center which enables asynchronous communication between students.

Each course is modularized, and four courses offered each semester. The interactive classes, conducted through the chat line, are offered at different times during the week and at the weekend, and the student is able to select the course that suits his/her current work, family, or social commitments.

The weekly procedure recommended for students is as follows:

- Read the orientation to the week's topic in the course guide.
- Check the tutorial questions and tasks, and then complete the set reading, preparing responses to the questions/tasks and posting these on the bulletin board.
- Read and react to issues and questions posed through the Student Conference Center. (Each week, one student is designated to act as the student host or animator of these discussions.)
- Take part in a 90-120 minute on-line interactive class to discuss the questions and tasks set for the week.
- Complete a weekly assignment.

These tasks are intended to take around five hours per week to complete, although feedback from students indicates that most devote considerably more time than this to the program.

In order to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the interactive classes, a series of protocols were developed. The most commonly used protocols are as follows:

? = I want to ask a question
 + = I would like to add something on this point
 A = I agree with this point
 D = I disagree with this point
 // = I've finished my turn
 go X = It's your turn X

Students are also able to use plug-ins to express emotions, attitudes, and reactions without interrupting the lesson flow.

The tutorials that yielded the data for this study were entitled, "An introduction to second language teaching and learning." The purposes of the course were to provide an overview of the field of second language teaching and learning, to identify major trends and issues and to show the theoretical and empirical bases for these, and to illustrate ways in which these ideas could be incorporated into practice.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section presents and analyzes extracts from the interactive tutorials as well as data provided by students through the Student Conference Center. Patterns in the data were identified through a grounded procedure described in Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Dey (1993). The procedure is an heuristic one. In this procedure, data are not fitted to pre-assigned categories. Rather, the categories emerge from the data through an iterative process of analysis and tentative category assignment. Through this process, four themes emerged. These were

1. The relationship between the context of work and the context of learning in distance education;
2. The discourse of synchronous interaction;
3. Learner control of the learning process; and
4. The evolving culture of the learning group.

The Relationship Between the Context of Work and the Context of Learning

A striking feature of the interactive discourse is the way students constantly reference insights and research outcomes from the set readings against the realities of their own working situation. Knowledge is situated and contextualized, as the two extracts which follow indicate. In the first extract, Koji relates the topic under discussion-task difficulty-to challenges he is currently confronting in his situation. In the second, James draws on his experience in team teaching to illustrate a point under discussion.

Professor: Koji, do you have a question? go Koji//

Koji : Yes. About the same topic//

Professor : OK. Ask away go Koji//

Koji : I teach at public school. My students generally want to have easy tasks if I ask them what they want to do. It is difficult to maintain the level of tasks. I mean in negotiation with my students is not so easy.//

Professor : No. That's why I say it's a mistake to simply go in and say "what do you want to do?" I start off with giving my students binary choices i.e. do you want to do task 3 or 4? or do you want to work in small groups or pairs. Let me ask you a question Koji, When you say "my students want easy tasks" do you mean that they'll choose tasks below a level where they're challenged? // Sorry -

go Koji//

Koji : My problem is that I have to follow the guideline prescribed by the Ministry. I have to teach a certain amount of materials. Generally speaking students do not want to work that hard. That's why I said it is not easy to listen to what my students want. But of course it is a matter of how teachers listen to them or examine their needs//

James : This tension between cultures and teaching styles is sometimes difficult to reconcile. I think that looking at the problem on different levels is a clearer way to look at it//

Professor : Would you care to elucidate? James?//

James : Well.. the team teaching that I have done in Japan has been frustrating. I try to use props, drawings etc but the other teacher explains it all in Japanese. I try to work out these differences but it is difficult for me now//

Professor : Obviously you need to negotiate ground rules with your co-teacher. Team teaching is like learning to dance, as my colleague (Name deleted) says. It's also much harder than it looks. I do a lot of team teaching, and one of the problems is that I'm a very intuitive teacher I have a very detailed lesson plan, but I never stick to it which causes frustration for my co-teachers . They start off with the waltz and end up doing the tango. Comments?//

On numerous occasions, the students themselves explicitly recognized and acknowledged the value of being able to study and work at the same time. One student stated,

This class is unique because my Professor is in Hong Kong, but we are scattered about Japan; and we are able to communicate, in a fashion, with one another. In relation to a graduate program, I would say that we have the advantage of being in the teaching world and yet we have a foot in the world of ideas through you. If I was in a graduate program in America, it would be difficult to study and work at the same time. I would be in deeper debt than I am already in.

Another student reported,

My conceptions of learning have changed. I now understand more how ideas and practice relate to one another. I think that this idea is very difficult to accomplish if you are in a university environment. The university seems to be interested in passing down traditions and teaching students how to take tests. Is this too cynical?

The comment about "being in the teaching world and yet having a foot in the world of ideas" resonates with a key theme that emerges as one interrogates the interactive discourse. Students constantly reference the issues, concepts, and ideas that emerge in the course of their reading and asynchronous discussions conducted through the Student Centre against the realities of their work situation.

The opportunity to make links between the decontextualized knowledge of the textbook and the realities of one's work situation is not unique to WBI, of course. In traditional distance programs, and also in face-to-face programs where students can continue to work, opportunities also exist. The advantage of WBI is that students are able to articulate those links, and engage in a conversation about them with their professor and fellow students as their ideas evolve in real time across different educational and cultural contexts. Teachers can, for example, exploit the store facility of WBI so that students' comments about their own teaching experiences can be retrieved for later reflection and discussion.

By constantly making connections between the world of study and the world of work, students are able, in the words of Reeves and Reeves (1997), to transform "academic" tasks into "authentic" tasks.

The task orientation dimension has academic tasks at one end, and authentic tasks at the other. Most existing examples of WBI employ academic tasks, but WBI can be designed to focus on authentic tasks relevant to the learner. . . .Cognitive learning theory indicates that the ways in which knowledge, skills and attitudes are initially learned affect the degree to which these abilities can be used in other contexts. . . .WBI should be designed to support the transfer of knowledge and skills wherever possible. (p. 61)

The data yielded by this study indicate that when the content is perceived by learners to be relevant to their professional work, and when they are able to undertake work and study concomitantly, then the students themselves transform academic tasks into authentic ones.

The Discourse of Synchronous Communication

The discourse of the interactive classes is similar to regular classroom interaction in several respects. Straight content input from the professor in response to a query or comment from a student is one such aspect of communication where a traditional classroom and the WBI interaction are indistinguishable. In fact, some of the transcripts (such as the following, with the exception of "go James") could easily have been a from a regular classroom.

Professor : We'll look at the distinction in greater detail in the curriculum course, which will be taught in face-to-face mode. Koji is correct - syllabus is a subset of curriculum. Curriculum includes syllabus (selecting, sequencing and justifying content), methodology (selecting and sequencing tasks and activities - i.e. processes) and evaluation (determining how well learners have done and how well the curriculum has served learners. In general education, Stenhouse introduced the revolutionary idea that process should have the same status as content (prior to this, the standard procedure was to specify content and then ask "What learning experiences can we devise to get the content inside the learners?"). In language education, this idea was picked up by people such as Mike Breen who argued that communication was a PROCESS not a set of linguistic content to be mastered. He used the neat analogy of learning as a journey, and suggested that with CLT the route (process) and the destination (content) merge.

Comments?//

James : +

Professor: Go James.

The pattern of Initiation - Response - Feedback which was identified in regular classrooms over twenty years ago (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), and which persists to the present (Cazden, 1988; Coulthard, 1992) is also apparent in the interactive classes as in the following:

Professor: Can you remember who created the concept 'communicative competence?'

Jo: +

Professor: Go, Jo.

Jo: Dell Hymes.

Professor: Great!

However, it is not the default pattern. In fact the I-R-F pattern is relatively rare in the data. This could be a reflection of the personal style and philosophy of the professor, and data from another professor may have revealed greater adherence to the I-R-F pattern. This illustrates the dangers of deriving generalizations from a single case.

Fundamental to face-to-face teaching is the transmission, creation, or interpretation of knowledge and skills. Whether the approach in a given classroom is characterized by a transmission or constructivist orientation will depend on a complex interplay of factors including cultural context, the personal style and philosophy of the teacher, and the nature of the curriculum.

In the WBI lesson transcripts analyzed for this paper, there was relatively little knowledge transmission because of the constraints of the medium, especially the time required to type in information and the delay between typing and receiving. The basic function appeared to be for students to seek clarification and additional input on concepts and knowledge that had already been negotiated with the professor and other members of the cohort through the Bulletin Board and the Student Center as is illustrated in the following extract. An important subsidiary function was a social one. Students used the opportunity to interact with one another to create a sense of being part of a community of scholars.

Professor : Strategic competence, refers to the ability to use verbal and nonverbal communicative strategies, to keep a conversation going . Basically, the model shows that effective communication requires far more than simply grammatical knowledge, although grammar is central to the ability to communicate. I'd now like to open up the discussion. Would anyone like to bid for a comment or question?//

Koji : Yes.//

Professor : Go Koji//

Koji : In Japan, English is taught as a foreign language. Students think that communicative competence (especially strategic competence sociolinguistic, etc) are not important to learn.
Professor: Interesting point, Koji.

Other variations were due to the lag time that occurs between soliciting a response and the response itself. It is not always evident whether or not the student has received the call (or even whether the student is actually at his or her computer terminal). In the following interaction, there was a considerable pause after Nick was called on. An open call was made, to which Kim responded. He was called on, but then Nick's response came in, followed by Kim's comment, leading to a somewhat disjointed piece of interaction. This overlapping of turns in synchronous computer-mediated data has been identified and described in non-instructional settings (e.g., Murray, 1989).

Professor : Nick?//

Professor : Anyone else?//

Kim : +

Professor : go Kim//

Nick : I found it to be very useful because let me look at what makes up my beliefs in teaching//
Kim : I think reflection is useful to help. I found it to be very useful because let me look at what makes up my beliefs in teaching avoiding mistakes and improving oneself and can help you become more proactive.//

The ability to provide immediate feedback and clarify areas of concern for students is another area when on-line interaction is similar to what happens in regular classrooms, and marks this form of interaction as different from traditional distance learning, in which feedback is delayed, even with the deployment of other electronic media such as fax and e-mail.

Professor : However, I think its a subject that all teachers should consider. I'm going to task each of you in turn, starting with James, to articulate three beliefs about language teaching that have had an influence on what you do. Go James//

James : I grew up in an environment where experiential learning was valued. I value experience above most everything. I finished my RSA certificate a couple of years ago and it was a very good fit for me. I like the communicative approach to teaching and I think that linking up form and function in context is very important. The nature of language is one in which I have only read about in introductory linguistic courses, and books, such as Steven Pinker's book; which you mention in Chapter 2. I have read recently about the different parts of the brain which are affected by language, but I should stop.//

Professor : James, I like the way your beliefs all fit together. There's a close harmony, for instance, between experiential learning - learning by doing - and CLT. There's also a great deal of fascinating stuff emerging on the structure of the brain and learning processes

The Professor is also able to get immediate feedback on aspects of the course, as exemplified in the following interaction:

Professor : It's also useful to review the lesson, if there's time, and discuss departures from the 'script' . This should also include a discussion of which departures worked and which didn't. Topic shift. Can I get a reaction to assignment 1. Did you find it straightforward or difficult? useful or not?//

|
Jo : +

Professor : go Jo//

Jo : Straightforward and useful for me//

Professor : Nick?//

Professor : Anyone else?//

Kim : +

Professor : Go Kim//

Nick : I found it to be very useful because let me look at what makes up my beliefs in teaching//

Kim : I think reflection is useful to help. I found it to be very useful because it let me look at what makes up my beliefs in teaching avoiding mistakes and improving oneself and can help you become more proactive.//

In reflecting on the interactions, students recognise and acknowledge this opportunity provided by the interactive tutorials. For example, one student, who had previously studied in a regular distance program,

reported, "Compared with ordinary distance learning courses, students can have the feeling that the teachers do exist; they can ask questions and be given feedback."

Where the discourse differs from most graduate level seminar discussions is in the need for a single voice (usually the professor's) to distribute speaking turns. Without this control, chaos is likely to ensue. However, it does mean that the teacher controls who gets to speak, what they get to speak about, and when they get to speak. From this perspective, the classroom is more teacher-centered, than learner-centered (Nunan & Lamb, 1996). This is illustrated in the next extract:

James : I am wondering about the development of a negotiated task in a small class size. I teach in the country-side of Japan. Do I give the students the option of individual and pair work? It is difficult for me to envision negotiation developing...

James : to the extent that it could in a large class.//

Jo : ?

Professor : That's an interesting observation. I was doing teacher training work in Latin America recently, and the teachers said "we can't negotiate, our classes are too large" Go Jo//

Jo : how small is small?//

Professor : go James//

Log jams are also common, when several students want to contribute at once. In the following interaction, several students make *bids*, and each has a rather different point to contribute to the discussion.

Kim : it sounds like teachers are going through the same change that businesses are finding out who our customers are, what they need and giving it to them the most efficient way possible//

Professor : Nick, just type 'bid' if you want to contribute. ... Nick?//

Nick : When I am evaluating my students needs, what do I do when they are unsure of what they need?//

Professor : Good question.//

Koji : I find there are always some who are "wet blanket". They want to stick to their learning styles. Then, group work does not work well. How do you make it effective?//

Professor : Would anyone like to comment?//

Jo : +

Professor : go Jo// Jo : I think learning styles are a lot like communicating styles and if people persist in using one style they will only be able to communicate using that style which will limit them with communicating with some people, i.e., other styles if students learn this, as a possible strategy, perhaps they will be more open to trying new styles//

Kim : +

Koji : +

Researchers in non-instructional settings have also identified this potential for log jams in synchronous computer-mediated communication, demonstrating that asynchronous modes may better facilitate multiple threads of discourse (e.g., Black, Levin, Mehan, & Quinn, 1983; Murray, 1995). The students themselves recognized the similarities and differences in the discourse of traditional instruction and on-line communications. One commented,

The language in classroom instruction is, of course, very different from the disjointed sentences we throw at one another every Saturday. However, I think that we are much more inclusive in our approach than the tradition bound classroom. Also, we are put on the spot more (because of the writing element) than in a class where a gesture or a nod sometimes suffices.

Such comments indicate that students were very much aware of, and often struggled with, the demands of a new way of learning. In evaluative comments such as the one above, a commentary about learning and communication processes is woven into discussion of substantive issues related to the content of the course.

In face-to-face classroom interaction, a student who misses out on a bid can often interpolate his or her contribution later in the discourse. However, in on-line interactions, if a student misses out on a bid, the discourse usually evolves in a direction that makes it impossible for that student to make a contribution in any coherent way. Similarly, it is impossible for the teacher to keep in short term memory, a variety of different bids and return to them later. It was this concern that led the Professor to make the suggestion to use e-mail, a mode better suited to multiple threads of discourse and a more permanent record for referencing.

Professor : Excellent. I'm concerned about the fact that as only one person can interact at a time, it may get frustrating. ...I have a suggestion I'd like you to consider. Could you submit via email to me at mentor@asiapacificu.edu questions or concerns you would like raised ... If you could do this by Friday afternoon, I could structure the tutorial around those issues which seem most pertinent to the most people I should say this is exciting to me, and I'm learning as I go

These limits on interaction because of the technology are even more salient in classes larger than the one reported on here. One way of dealing with this limiting aspect of the technology is to set up break out rooms. A session with say, twenty students begins in plenary session, with the professor providing input. They are then divided into smaller groups, tasks are set and a group leader designated, and they are sent to different break out rooms to carry out their group tasks. The professor visits and monitors these interactions, and then, at an appropriate time, calls all students back into plenary session for a debriefing.

It is interesting that when questioned about possible frustrations stemming from limited opportunities to provide input or to interact with the professor, students in general did not see this as a problem.

I think the amount of time spent with my Professor is probably more than that on a campus. This is especially true if you include the ideas provided by the Professor. I think there have been many ideas floating around this Cohort session. I think the amount of time spent with students varies greatly. Sometimes, if you can meet the right people, you can build a solid study group. This is sometimes difficult to do.

An additional problem with on-line chat is that it is evanescent. This creates difficulties in terms of both continuity and coherence. However, at the conclusion of each tutorial, the lesson transcripts are posted on the bulletin board for students to consult and to review. This record of the tutorial is an additional learning resource that is available to the students.

Data from the lesson transcripts indicate that by their nature, the tutorials reinforce the central role of the teacher, and that ways need to be found to give learners a more active role. These might include break out

rooms, extending the student host system to the classroom sessions and making great use of the Student Conference Center.²

Learner-Controlled Discourse

As the course developed, opportunities for learners to take ownership of the interactive classes increased. The first of these happened when my system crashed and the students found themselves alone in their virtual classroom.

Professor : go Jo//

Jo : It seems there is an over-reliance, over dependence and acceptance of ESL research in EFL situations which I feel aren't relevant. Krashen and Swain (despite their disagreements) are both strictly ESL which creates an air of scepticism for me (and others) involved in a strictly EFL setting. Is there some consideration we can pay to this?//

Professor : Maintain your air of healthy scepticism. Also, and we'll be working through this in the course on research methods, ...

Professor leaves:

webmaster leaves:

Jo : Are we alone?

Koji : What happened///

Jo : It appears there have been some technical difficulties. Either that or he didn't like my question.

Jo : I'm sure they will be back soon/

webmaster enters:

Kim : The prof's. school server has been having a few problems today//

At this point the Webmaster took over and farmed out opportunities to speak. However, the students themselves took control of the content of the interactions. (This was a necessity because the webmaster was not a TESOL specialist, and merely farmed out the speaking turns.)³

Koji : Webmaster, should I stop mentioning about depending on ESL issue?//

Kim : Doesn't this lead you to conclude that each class should be taught as a separate entity?

Jo : +

webmaster : go, Jo//

Jo : It seems there is so little "true EFL" research and so ESL research is constantly cited which bears little or no application in EFL//

James : +

webmaster : go, James//

James : True, I find myself trying to apply all of this reading to my own situation. Especially the

simplistic assumptions talked about in question 7. Learner id and learner motivation bring up interesting points in relation to the discussion...

Nick : ?

James : Many of my students are not so motivated or do not have the same basic assumptions about the class that I do.//

Kim : +

webmaster : go, Nick//

The Professor then re-entered the classroom from another site, and took control of the class again, unaware of the ground that had been covered.

Professor enters: I'm back - I logged in from home. Sorry about that ...

James : differences and ESL and EFL research talked about above//

webmaster : welcome, Professor!//

Jo : +

Professor : Go Jo//

Jo : I hope the prof. can review our dialogue later and comment on it for us, it was very interesting and we raised many questions and issues//

It is ironic that it was the failure of the technology during the course that led to opportunities for student-led interactions. It was clear from these instances where learners took control of the classroom through necessity rather than choice that they were capable of exercising autonomy, and also of learning collaboratively.

An Evolving Culture of the On-Line Classroom

In addition to providing opportunities for interactive communication, another aspect of the course that marked it as having greater similarity to classroom-based rather than to traditional distance learning programs, was the fact that the technology facilitated the evolution of a cohesive culture within the cohort. Within a short space of time, the cohort had developed its own rules and norms of interaction. Particularly interesting was the way in which the different electronic means of communication (bulletin board, interactive classes, and student conference center) came to fulfil their own unique functions within the teaching/learning process. As the course developed, it became clear that these different forms of communication had different advantages (and disadvantages) and each served its own unique functions.

In the middle of the course, one of the students reflected on the functions of the different forms of electronic communication and commented,

The bulletin board is set up to provide additional material for us to chew on. The papers posted are of great benefit to me. I wish we could keep posting things there after this class is over in May. The limitation of this is the way it is organized. . . .Off-line communication is designed to help us get feedback from the other students. This is a really key part of the course. I think that the opportunity to put your ideas out there is really important. At times I have wondered what I have written and if I really understood what I was trying to say with my words, but the chance to write is authentic and it gives me

something to reflect on. When not enough people write, the off-line dialogue breaks down. Off-line has to be some kind of messy collaboration because we need to hear our voices. It is the only way we have of communicating. The on-line tutorial is an opportunity to sharpen our ideas or clear up questions about the reading. The benefit to this is in the nature of the class; we have an important resource (you) who we can bounce questions off. The limitation is in the technology. Some students find it hard to communicate because of technological problems. It's all brand new.

In the following interaction, which was controlled by the administrator, the students are working out the best way of utilizing the Student Conference Center, and the interactive tutorials. The issue at this point related to the fact that different students will have different questions and concerns arising out of the set reading, and that not all students might get to voice their concerns during the interactive tutorial. One student (James) proposed a procedural solution, while another made a bid to get his own concern on the agenda.

James: +

Professor: "?"

Student Services : go, James//

James : Yes, should we send any questions individually, because as a group it would be rather difficult for them to arrive by tomorrow//

Student Services : go prof//

Jo : ?

Professor : Perhaps they could be generated through the kinds of discussion you've been having all week. I can 'eavesdrop' on the 'conversations' and distill out what I see as key issues. //

Student Services : go Jo//

Jo : The Savignon article was a bit unclear as to the exact meaning of communicative competence. Perhaps we could clarify it and get some understanding of each other's perceptions of it//

Initially, the interactive classes were meant to fulfil a similar function as face-to-face tutorials. Students prepared for the sessions by reading a chapter or an article, and made notes on a set of tutorial questions. The intention was that the tutorial would be devoted to an interactive discussion based on these questions. However, as the course progressed and this particular group developed, it became clear that students wanted to use these interactive sessions to discuss a wide range of issues. The real value of the sessions was not only, and perhaps not primarily, to deal with content issues, but to provide students with a sense that they belonged to a community. However, at one point I became concerned that the sessions were not as closely focused on the actual substance of the weekly readings as had been intended initially, and raised it with the students.

During the course, I felt that some students might be frustrated by our collective failure in these classes to stick to the script. However, from feedback provided by students, it appeared that this opportunity to raise issues not necessarily directly related to the topic for that particular session was highly appreciated.

Professor : Can I get a procedural comment? As I indicated in my email, I'm thrilled at the fact that these tutorials range far and wide. However, I'd be interested to know whether any of you are frustrated that we are not restricting ourselves to the "nitty-gritty" of the questions set out in the study guide. comment?//

Jo : +

Professor : go Jo//

Jo : I'm very please with the way things have gone...

Nick : Agree//

Professor : great ...

Jo : but sometimes feel like I'm taking too much of the classes time in pursuing inquiries of personal interest... comments from prof or others?//

James : +

Professor : Well, everyone has the opportunity to contribute, and I hope our colleagues will chip in if they have a problem ...

Professor : James?//

James : I feel if it is in any way related to the coursework, it helps the material come alive//

Professor : Great! I hope you see me as a resource ...

Jo action: : bows gracefully.

As students got to know one another, and interpersonal relationships within the group developed, students began to socialize on-line. As they did so, their personalities, interests, and preoccupations emerged in much the same way as they do in regular classrooms.

Professor : Good comment. I'm going ahead with the tutorial now even though not everyone is in the classroom. Kim?//

Kim : I found the best thing for my Japanese was to join the local tennis club. I get that extra 3 hours//

James : +

Professor : Another good point. I don't know whether you've read my research into the 'good' language learner ...

Jo enters:

Koji : +

Professor : I did case studies of 44 'good' learners, and finding ways to practice out of class was THE thing that defined these learners.

Morning Jo. James, then Koji//

Jo : Greetings all//

James : I also play badminton which is good practice//

Koji : I really enjoy reading Chapter 3, as I am trying to persuade my colleagues to teach English communicatively,...

Nick enters: I hope we can later discuss how to give effective group/pair work to students.//

Tennis and badminton, eh? how to grunt in 40 languages! ...

As students got to know each other, they began to reveal more and more about themselves, and socializing became an important feature of the interactive sessions. At the end of the course, the students even organized their own virtual party to celebrate. They did this by agreeing to a time and logging in to one of the classrooms for a purely social exchange.

DISCUSSION

This case study took the form of an exploratory investigation of the learning opportunities provided by a Web-based distance program in TESOL. Data for the study were the synchronous and asynchronous interactions between the professor and students during an eight week component of the course.

Four key themes emerged from the data. The first of these related to the close relationship that developed between the world of learning and the world of work. Students made constant connections between the things they were learning on the course and their work situations. In effect, the workplace became a laboratory in which they were able to contest the ideas that they encountered on the course. While this close connection between learning and work also occurs in what I have called traditional distance programs, opportunities provided by regular synchronous and asynchronous contact between participants in the learning process meant that students were able to engage in collaborative learning with their professor and the other students on the course in a manner similar to that enjoyed by students in face-to-face teaching situations.

The second theme that emerged had to do with the discourse of synchronous interaction. Here, again, there were similarities to face-to-face interaction. At times, particularly in the early stages of the course, interactions tended to be teacher dominated. However, as the course developed, learners themselves came to take greater and greater control of the learning process. Aspects of the interactive discourse are discussed as theme three in the body of the paper.

The fourth and final theme relates to the evolving culture of the learning group. Following on from the seminal work of Smith and Geoffrey (1968), ethnographic approaches to the understanding and analysis of classroom interaction have become commonplace. Classrooms are seen as mini cultures, having their own rules and norms of interaction. From the data presented in this paper, it seems clear that the interactive opportunities provided by technology facilitate the evolution of a shared culture between participants in the learning process. What made this unique was the fact that the participants had never met.

There is little doubt that as a means of communication, WBI has powerful advantages over traditional distance programs. Opportunities to interact through chat lines provide students with a sense of belonging to a community of scholars and learners. In addition, asynchronous communication provided by systems such as the Student Center enable learners to take control of aspects of their own learning, to communicate with each other 24 hours a day, and thereby to extend and strengthen the learning community. WBI has an advantage over regular instruction in that learners are able to continue working while they study. In addition to the obvious financial benefits from such an arrangement (and one that

WBI shares with traditional distance education programs), the concomitant work/study arrangement facilitates the development of connections between the theory and principles taught through the courses and the realities of the workplace. WBI is therefore more than an instrument for more effective program delivery; it is a powerful mechanism for activating contextualized, experiential learning.

While the technology facilitated the evolution of a learning community which was closer to face-to-face classrooms than it was to traditional forms of distance learning, it also brought with it many problems. Particularly in the early stages, as students developed knowledge and skills, there were problems created by both human error and technical failure of servers, computers, and modems. On one occasion, when a student's university server was down, he called in to the webmaster by telephone, and the webmaster communicated on his behalf via the telephone. This band-aid approach to communicating served to remind the group that the Internet was still "Model-T Ford" technology, as one participant put it.

In the course of the paper, I have referred to the fact that this is a case study, and that the cohort making up the study was relatively small. It must be acknowledged that some of the insights generated by the study, such as the sense of community which developed between the students and their perception of access to the professor, may well have stemmed from the size of the group.

As indicated in the introduction to this paper, part of the motivation in collecting and analyzing the data was to improve practice. Having spent many hours analyzing, interpreting, and pondering what turned out to be a large amount of data, I propose to make the following modifications to the interactive tutorials:

- Further refine and develop the protocols of on-line interaction
- Investigate the feasibility of either video or audio links with students (while this has been possible for some time, its introduction would preclude many potential students from participating in the program)
- Experiment with ways of freeing up the discourse and giving students greater autonomy and control over the on-line interaction (for example, by having short brainstorming sessions during which students are free to make spontaneous contributions to the class)
- Develop alternative modes of classroom interaction (e.g., using other on-line classrooms as breakout rooms for small group discussions)
- Find a way of allowing students to interpolate comments and speak out of turn without disrupting the discourse
- Find ways for students rather than the teacher to take control of the interaction

CONCLUSION

While WBI facilitates collaborative and independent learning and is in harmony with a constructivist view of knowledge, and while it offers great potential for those who adhere to constructivist, student-centered, and collaborative approaches to learning (Nunan, 1999), there is nothing inherent in the media offered by WBI that takes it in this direction (Hiltz, 1995). It can also be used to support traditional, teacher-centered transmission-based programs and courses. In the end, it is the learning that matters, and the technology is simply a means to that end. This may seem a somewhat trite, even obvious, observation. However it is one that appears to be often overlooked in the excitement generated by the emergence of new ways of bringing together teachers and teaching, and learners and learning.

Fundamental to adult learning theory is the notion that the context of learning is crucial to adults undertaking further study. Distance programs enable the student to undertake award courses without the need to give up work. This is particularly relevant for TESOL teachers, who often work in contexts where opportunities for formal study are not readily available.

Different combinations of print, on-line, and off-line resources offer greater flexibility than either traditional classroom or traditional distance programs. The lack of learner interaction which characterizes

traditional distance education can be overcome by the capabilities of WBI. Despite this, all of the participants in the program described and evaluated in this case study believe that distance learning, whether supported by WBI or not, is a second best to the opportunities provided by face-to-face instruction.

NOTES

1 Although, in the case of first and foreign languages, see accounts by Kern (1995) and Wegerif and Mercer (1997).

2 I am indebted to one of the reviewers of an earlier draft of this paper for pointing out that the educational merits of Internet-based learning are to be found in integrated distributed learning environments "with an emphasis on distributed cognition and shared expertise, rather than on on-line, real-time tutorials." The data from this study certainly support this view.

3 Note, this happened on only one occasion.

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