All Work and No Play?  
The Design and Development of a Virtual Social Space (VSS) to Support Distance Learning Students

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Abstract  
The disappearance of physical social spaces from today’s society is seen by some scholars to be a modern phenomenon, resulting in increasing isolation and lack of socialisation. In fact, this is always the case in distance education, due to geographical dispersion and disparate time schedules of learners. Very often, peer-to-peer socialisation in distance education only occurs as part of formal learning activities, or is just left to the student’s own initiative. This situation is then compounded by the modularity of VLEs, forcing students to jump from one module space to another as they progress through a course. All discussion threads, conversations or record of previous dialogues are then lost. This paper describes the design and development of a Virtual Social Space (VSS) to resolve this predicament and support the creation of a learning community for a Continuing Professional Distance Education (CPDE) Masters in IT Management programme.

Introduction  
Distance Education (DE) is an exciting and rapidly growing phenomenon that schools, universities, education boards, and governments are actively exploring. The major trigger for this renewed interest in a well tested, but never really widespread mode of delivery, has been the recent inclusion of eLearning concepts and technologies. In its purest form, it is an educational arrangement where tutors and learners interact and engage in learning activities apart from one another, away from the regular place of learning, for part or all of the regular learning period.

Therefore, and as pointed out by Galusha (1997), while distance education has been in existence for at least 100 years, the delivery medium has changed from pencil and paper correspondence courses to real-time Internet courses. But, regardless of the medium, distance courses have common and inherent characteristics that will result in similar benefits and problems.

Traditionally, problems and barriers encountered by students fall into several distinct categories (Galusha, 1997): costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of experience, and training. From these, student support may be the most critical factor for the success of DE. Isolation, which results from the physical separation, different time schedules and diverse learning paces, is inherent in the distance learning model. Thus, support for distance learners should not be overlooked when designing and planning distance programs, i.e. academic, pastoral, subject matter and technical assistance. The inclusion of eLearning approaches and technologies is perceived to be able to resolve most of these support and communication problems.

In fact, as part of most Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), online communication has been seen to open up several new possibilities for enabling interactions among peers, tutors and academic staff. Communication in these VLEs are enabled by a range of simply implemented but powerful online capabilities such as email, bulletin boards, chat rooms and discussion groups. Lake (1999) proposes several modes of communication: one-way (tutor students) communication through course notes and explicit knowledge web pages; two-way discussions (students students) through tutorial learning activities and unstructured communication (tutor student) either in informal asynchronous communication areas (the ‘Cafeteria’) or in private chat rooms.

DE programme syllabi are usually arranged around a series of modules that have to be completed by students in order to attain the necessary number of credits.
When translated into a VLE design, DE courses often have a modular architecture. Each module has its own individual web based learning course environment and assigned tutors. Students jump from one course module to the next until they acquire the necessary credits. These module spaces are usually separate subject areas, with no direct connection between them. Consequently, students lose a holistic view of the programme and the building of a course/learning community is made extremely difficult. This modular approach provides an ideal support for the first two types of communication described above, but a “module Cafeteria” is adequate to support informal and social communication only while undertaking a particular module.

In fact, since students are regularly transferred from one module environment to the next, the socialising and study mechanisms (e.g. non-module specific topics, discussion threads, well known environments, link facilities) are constantly disrupted. Furthermore, students lack an overall anchoring space that binds the different modules, cohorts and tutors together.

This situation was identified as a crucial area for research by the academic team in charge of a part-time DE MA in Information Technology Management (MA ITM) at the Department of Information Studies, University of Sheffield, UK. Through action research, the team identified the need to provide a persistent overall course area for administrative support, general course and university information, as well as online peer-to-peer communication and socialising in a familiar setting. This resulted in the Virtual Social Space (VSS) presented in this paper.

What is social space?

The research team’s initial ideas as to what constituted a “social space” centred on a number of assumptions. It is, on most occasions, an area limited by its physical boundaries. It is a place where individuals can meet face-to-face (f2f) with one another and interact in an informal manner. Usually, these areas are clearly demarcated from areas of work, however, participants do bring in elements of work if they want to. If the social space is a physical area, it might be decorated in a way that reflects the unique identity of the group of individuals who use it. This perception of a social space is not easily transposed into a web-based virtual space.


- Spatial practice “embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation, in this case a DE learning community. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion, and in this case a sense of belonging to a DE course and cohesion as members of the cohort of that course;
- Representations of space are abstract and conceptualised constructs, that in this case is a virtual environment supported by web technology;
- Representational space (or, better and more literally, spaces of representation) is “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of inhabitants and ‘users’“.

Therefore, and as noted by Wise (1999), a social space is perceived, conceived, and lived by a community. In the case of this research, the need for this space was perceived by both staff and students, designed and conceived by the research team according to the perceived needs of students, and is now currently being lived by the present cohort of ITM students and tutors.

Design and Development of the VSS

The early design and structure of the VSS resulted from an MSc research project undertaken by Gilchrist (2000). The initial set of requirements was identified through a questionnaire sent to students. The questionnaire was split into four sections: “Getting to know you”, “Social Scenes”, “Comfort and Advice”, and “Logging On”. The first section acted as a gentle introduction to the questionnaire and consisted of background and demographic questions. The second section asked the respondents to think about the ways in which they had socially interacted with each other and to consider their attitudes towards their learning environment and their fellow students. The third section focussed on their use of the existing student support system within the Department. The final section asked them about their use of the University computer system and introduced them to the modus operandi of the research project.
Through this questionnaire Gilchrist (2000) identified the need for a number of elements of perceived by the students to be important components of a VSS, namely: a Personal Portraits Gallery, a Chat Room, a Social Calendar, a Course News section, a Useful Contacts section and an Alumni section. These elements were then grouped into three major VSS areas: Work related area, leisure (Play) area and a Retrospective look into course advice and alumni area.

The VSS for the MA in ITM course was then developed using a prototyping approach. Prototyping can be defined as, "building a physical working model of the proposed system, and using it to identify weaknesses in our understanding of the real requirements" (Crinnion 1991: 17). The initial VSS prototype was a working model and a first attempt to incorporate the elements outlined above into a web site. The prototype was built using WebCT (the VLE adopted by the University of Sheffield) and aimed at providing a representational space in which the students could socialise. The feedback obtained from testing this prototype was then used to develop it further. The architecture of this prototype is illustrated in Fig. 1.

This initial work was then further developed with the help of the Learning Media Unit and evolved to the final VSS implementation as illustrated in Fig 2. The home page provides entry points into three main areas: the Work Zone, the Social Circle and the History Channel.

The Work Zone

This area comprises the following main areas: Useful Academic Contacts, Course News, Course Information and the Staff-Student Committee Meeting Minutes.

The intention for this area is to allow students to obtain practical and administrative information relating to their studies. This area should also provide students useful contact details related to academic, social and other matters of interest to their academic lives.
The Social Circle Zone

The Social Circle includes the Chat Room, Social Calendar, Useful Social Contacts and the Personal Portrait Gallery.

The Personal Portraits Gallery is supported by a student home page tool provided by WebCT. Students can personalise their own space within this area. This facility allows students to establish their own identities within the social area as well as enabling them to actively contribute and be involved with the VSS. The perceived need for a Chat Room was actually implemented by using the asynchronous WebCT Bulletin Board. The choice for an asynchronous solution was based on practical evidence that DE students tend to prefer this type of communication method. It is an area for the informal exchange of personal, social and course related information. Similarly, the Social Calendar was also implemented using a WebCT tool that facilitates the exchange of social event information amongst all of the students involved. Its functionality means that students can post their own social events up in the calendar. It is another area that will allow the students to contribute and interact with the site.

The History Channel

The Advice Centre included in this area takes the form of a “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) area in which students can ask questions and leave advice for future years. This serves two purposes. Firstly, it is a facility that enables the reification of experiences across cohorts of students and secondly it will encourage new visitors to get involved with to the site as it is already inhabited (Chen, 1999).

Conclusions and Future Work

Designing the VSS for the MA in ITM was an excellent challenge to both tutors and students involved. The process encouraged the team to think broadly and research laterally about DE student experience, as well as to question and mature a number of theoretical assumptions about student interaction and the process of learning.

Early evaluation has shown that despite a very high initial interest by the students, the VSS is currently underused. Students do visit the site at regular intervals, but only a small group of first year students have really used it as a social space. Further investigation has shown that other students, that did not have the VSS available from the start of their courses, had already created parallel communication channels (e.g. email list and Yahoo Clubs), which they kept as their favourite socialisation vehicle. In fact, although they expressed appreciation of having such a site, they have continued using their familiar CMC environments. Thus, results of these early evaluation results are not absolutely conclusive. The research team will carry out a full investigation by the end of the first year of usage and will also follow closely the small community already being formed.

Bibliography


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