The practice of web conferencing: Where are we now?

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Birgit:
• Lecturer in mathematics and computing
• Undergraduate, large classes (>200), on campus and distance

Shirley:
• Senior Lecturer in online pedagogies
• Postgraduate, small classes (<50), all online (distance)
• Context
• Trial of web conferencing - 3 phases
• Method of study
• Reflections, observations, questions
USQ context

- USQ - regional, multi-campus, 26,000 students
- Large distance student population - 75% of students studying off campus in over 70 countries
- Large percentage of students mature age, work full-time, study part-time, live remotely

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- USQ Vision – to provide flexible and inclusive learning experiences

Why trial web conferencing?

Driven by needs….

- Needs of the students…
- Needs of the teachers…
- Needs of the institution…
A qualitative, action research method provided an iterative, cyclical approach to 3 phases of the trial...
Phase 1:
- with undergraduate, mathematics students
- with postgraduate education students

Example: Course - *Algebra and Calculus*
Teacher and students explore maths concepts with shared whiteboard, graphing calculator, audio and text chat…
• ...allowed the ability to be understood and to demonstrate complicated working out simply and effectively...

• ...ease of communication through voice and visually with the whiteboard was the perfect way to communicate with others while studying externally...

• ...creates a more personal feeling of interaction between us (students) and our teacher which is not normally found when studying externally and has helped to alleviate feelings of isolation...

(Birgit’s students)

Example: Course – Online Pedagogy in Practice

Students brainstormed using shared whiteboard, audio, text chat...

Students conducted interactive presentations with their peers, recorded the sessions and then facilitated additional asynchronous discussion activities...
• A fascinating outcome was the gradual move away from the use of traditional tools to the newer technologies for collaboration. In the end, WebCT became somewhat of a backwater which had interesting ramifications from an ‘LMS’ perspective. Having been totally absorbed with supporting the LMS in my own university this was quite a revelation and somewhat liberating as well…

• …much more enthusiastic about collaborative work online and the potential of online groups to produce quality work. I am keen to use this much more in my practice…

(Shirley’s students)

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Phase 2:

– University-wide trial
Example: Foundation Computing

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From the teachers…

• …my first conferencing session…was fantastic. I felt like a real teacher doing real teaching in a virtual environment – The students loved it and so did I.

• Another great learning tool being offered to external students. One student said that just being present, listening and learning has inspired them to get started on their project…

• …I’ve gotten a bit greedy and booked all my tute slots for my first year course for the whole semester - I really hope we get this tool for keeps!!!

Phase 3:
– impact on practice
– issues and challenges
Impact on practice…where are we now?

- Why use web conferencing?
- New pedagogy?
- Student perspective
- Implications for staff
- Value for money?
- Institutional processes and practices?

Issues challenges questions…

- Building trust
- Proper integration from the outset
- Workload allocation
- Synchronising time
- Tensions between flexibility and synchronicity
- Discipline specific use?