

DELIVERING THE DIPLOMA IN PROBATION STUDIES IN NORTH WALES AND DYFED POWYS: ON-LINE LEARNING EXPLORED

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Abstract

Drawing upon three years experience of teaching through Blackboard, a Managed Virtual Learning Environment (MVLE), the authors examine the conceptual confusion that tends to surround e-learning. They explore the new opportunities and limitations afforded to students in an on-line learning environment compared to traditional educational learning environments. The article describes, contextualises and documents the particular experience of delivering the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) on-line to Trainee Probation Officers in North Wales and Dyfed Powys, and incorporates feedback from the Trainees themselves to illustrate some of the benefits and issues faced by e-learning students. A clear distinction is made between the MVLE and distance learning, and the article concludes by arguing that blended learning, based on andragogic constructivist strategies is the way forward, as opposed to traditional established pedagogies that are well served in the real world classroom and in correspondence based distance learning.

Introduction

Higher education has, in recent years, been encouraged to attract students from diverse and non-traditional backgrounds. Some institutions have sought to do this by offering more flexible routes of study involving part time, day release and/or distance learning. A growing number of universities now offer degree courses through the internet. However, despite a general growth in web based courses, electronic learning (e-learning) remains a poorly understood and theorised approach to education (Stephenson, 2001) and the availability of e-learning tends to be limited. This paper explores the experience of delivering the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) course on-line in North Wales and Dyfed Powys and seeks to address the conceptual confusion that tends to surround e-learning, and contribute to the wider debate about the future of on-line learning in Probation Training and the potential of e-learning generally. The paper begins with a

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definition of e-learning and a brief outline of the activities that underpin e-learning in higher education. It then examines the way e-learning differs significantly from correspondence based distance learning, before comparing and contrasting e-learning with traditional lecture/seminar based learning - through this examination the unique and distinguishing features of e-learning are highlighted. Next, the emerging contemporary consensus about good teaching and learning practice is discussed in order to consider the particular way e-learning provides opportunities for students to engage in meaningful and effective educational experiences, including deep learning as opposed to surface learning. Drawing upon the authors' experiences as Programme Leaders and Year Tutors responsible for the development and delivery of the on-line DipPS in Wales, the opportunities and challenges created by e-learning are explored. Qualitative feedback from thirteen students who undertook the course is presented and considered. Tentative conclusions are drawn about the potential for future use of e-learning within the probation service and the higher education sector.

E-learning

Hall and Snider (1998) define e-learning as the process of using a computer to access the internet to log onto a programme of study. E-learning involves students engaging in on-line synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning takes place when all the students are present on-line at the same time, and are engaged in lectures and/or discussion, usually within a chat room or virtual lecture room. Asynchronous learning occurs when the students are all accessing lecture material and/or contributing to a debate, but not necessarily at the same time. For example, when students and lecturers post replies to threads of conversation at different times, and return to the thread periodically to catch up and contribute further to the debate. At a basic level, e-learning may involve students accessing lecture notes on-line, engaging in email communication, and participating on on-line discussion boards. At a more advanced level, e-learning can take place within specifically designed on-line MVLEs. While some HE institutions have developed their own MVLEs most have subscribed to commercially available systems. Blackboard, WebCT and FirstClass are currently the three most popular web based learning environments available. These MVLEs enable students and lecturers to:

- i. Access lecture notes including PowerPoint, video and audio material
- ii. Form exclusive tutor groups and seminar groups (for on-line synchronous and asynchronous discussions and file exchange)
- iii. Send and receive email communications to selected groups or individuals
- iv. Set up Discussion Boards (also allowing messages to have attachments)
- v. Create web links to internet sites and electronic books, research reports
- vi. Set up questionnaires, surveys and quizzes and collate student performance
- vii. Monitor student on-line access and participation
- viii. Post assignments through a Digital Drop Box

Choices and Differences

The desire of the UK government to attract a wider range of students into Higher Education has led to more flexible teaching and learning strategies, including a growth of part time degrees, and an expansion of correspondence based distance learning. E-learning can further assist to diversify the delivery of higher education. Seventy five per cent of students in the UK currently have access to their own computer and a modem, so the technology for web learning is within the grasp of an increasing number of students (Curtis, 2002); though this may still be a significant financial challenge to poor students who are less likely to have internet access.

E-learning has not yet established itself to the same extent as part time or distance learning routes. E-learning tends to be seen wrongly as a form of distance learning when it actually offers a third medium for learning that is neither distance learning nor traditional campus based. Whilst e-learning and distance learning both involve education being offered to learners who are in a different physical location to the educational provider, e-learning does not involve students working alone or at a distance from other learners. Whilst most distance learning involves students processing information that has been posted to them, and working primarily alone at home, e-learning at its best, involves students working together synchronously and asynchronously, learning and sharing experiences and perceptions as part of a virtual community of learners on a MVLE. For this reason e-learning is sometimes described as networked learning as opposed to distance learning. However, the experience of being part of a community of learners in e-learning, does not replicate the experience of the traditional face to face setting. Although the potential exists via the use of web cams and video conferencing for students to physically observe each other on line, e-learning students are not physically together. The virtual lecture theatre replaces the lecture theatre, and physicality is replaced by virtuality leading to a distinctly different teaching and learning experience. Virtuality is significantly different from physicality because of the virtual world's disinhibiting, disemboding and anonymising characteristics. While e-learning can claim to combat some of the isolation of learning alone associated with distance learning, a different form of isolation occurs as learners engage in considerable day to day contact with fellow students and academic staff, but are isolated from physicality.

E-Learning in Context

E-learning has not evolved in a vacuum but has arisen in the context of global changes in the nature of society which have led to new ideas about what constitutes good education and learning practices. Over the last few decades there has been a discernible shift of emphasis in higher education away from a classical educational focus on what is taught, to a constructionist postmodern focus on what is learnt. This shifting emphasis, from teaching to learning, can be located as part of wider shift away from a modernist focus on truths, rules and order to a postmodern focus on relativity, conditionality and diversity. The 'modern' classical educational approach has largely been predicated on the belief that knowledge exists outside of people and context, in an objective form that can be documented and transmitted to others (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin, 2003). From a

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modernist perspective knowledge is considered to be rational and universalistic. Education is then dominated by acquisition metaphors and didactic teaching approaches wherein knowledge flows from those who know, to those who do not. In this paradigm the lecturer is the source of knowledge and education involves the student learning from the lecturer, who stretches and challenges student thinking by introducing them to rational thinking and scientific research within a particular body of knowledge. This modernist classical educational approach focuses on 'the education given', which contrasts with the postmodern constructionist approach to education with the focus on 'the learning that takes place' (Mayes, 2001). This second approach stresses that knowledge is not absolute but conditional, contextually dependent and liable to transformation over time. Consequently, knowledge cannot easily be 'given' or transmitted neutrally or objectively to others. Postmodernism challenges the idea of universal truths, with grand or meta-narratives of knowledge and truth replaced by more fragmentary and relativistic conceptions of truths (Jarvis, Holford and Griffin, 2003). The nature of the learning environment can have significant influence in terms of whether students engage in surface learning or whether they are able to benefit from deep learning (Laurillard, 1979). In the MVLE the traditional learning environment is increasingly replaced by approaches wherein students take charge of their own learning, and learning takes place largely outside the lecture theatre, with students encouraged to develop skills in reflectivity and self directed learning. Within a global environment that embraces multiple realities, sustained and systematic learning of fixed knowledge becomes less important, instead greater emphasis is placed upon reflectivity, critical reasoning, abstraction, self directed learning and independent thought.

From Andragogy to Andragogies

The emergence of postmodern perspectives has generated challenges to traditional educational practices and further raised doubts about teaching and learning practices. The modern classical approach to education is often termed pedagogic from the Greek 'paid', meaning child, and 'agogos', meaning leading. Pedagogy is literally the art and science of teaching children. In a pedagogical approach, the teacher takes on an adult role whilst the student takes on a child's role. The teacher has full responsibility for making decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and then finally assessing what has been learned. Modern educational approaches have largely adopted pedagogic teaching approaches to teaching both children and adults on the basis of the assumed universality of truth including the rules about learning. The constructivist approach on the other hand, is often described as andragogic from the Greek andragogy meaning adult learning. Andragogy recognises that as adults mature, they become more independent and responsible for their own behaviours and lives and have an increasing need to be self-directing (Knowles, 1970). Supporters of an andragogic approach to learning assert that classicist pedagogic approaches to adult learning do not take developmental changes into account, and that for many adult learners this produces tension and resentment during pedagogic educational experiences.

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There is a growing consensus towards constructivist-andragogic approaches in adult education, encouraging learners to engage in critical and reflective exchanges with their peers as well as with lecturing staff. Debate and dialogue are therefore widely considered to be the new main elements of effective learning (Dewar, 1996; Hartman, 1995). Associated with this is the growing acceptance that whilst andragogy should supplant pedagogy, andragogy itself should be replaced with andragogies. This recognises that there is not a single style of learning, but students will have a range of preferred learning styles. Honey and Mumford (1986) for example suggest student groups are generally composed of individuals who tend towards one or more of four dominant learning styles: theoretical, pragmatic, active, and reflective. They argue that responding to individual student needs requires a range of suitable learning opportunities to be provided. This multi-modal approach to learning has achieved prominence within probation training and indeed within practice when mentoring offenders, as a result of the effective practice focus on responsiveness to the preferred learning styles of offenders. In the education context as well as the probation context, andragogy and responsiveness have largely been confined to theoretical debates, with few practice examples to draw upon. It is interesting, then, to observe that accredited programmes for offenders under supervision are still geared towards 'one size fits all' programmes with a strong pedagogic experience. There is little doubt too that dominant forms of educational experience in the UK are largely pedagogic in nature and not particularly sensitive to individual student learning styles. Whilst there is an emerging shift towards constructivist-andragogic approaches (Jonassen and Land, 2000) the didactic, pedagogic based lecture remains the norm. Students continue to spend most of their time listening and writing notes in the lecture room as opposed to constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge for themselves (Alexander and Boud, 2001).

Seizing Affordances

It is important to remember that the principles underpinning contemporary good practice in learning and teaching remain the same regardless of whether learning takes place in the lecture theatre, at a distance through correspondence, or in the virtual world of the MVLE. The challenge for these three distinctive learning environments is to what extent they are able to facilitate a good learning environment. E-learning involves the deployment of new technology for the purposes of teaching, as opposed to the adoption of a new paradigmatic shift in the process of learning. As Alexander and Boud (2001) point out, whilst e-learning may only involve the deployment of new technology towards teaching and learning, the actual environment within which such learning takes place has a significant influence on what is educationally achievable. Conventional approaches to education and learning have often failed to develop responsive, andragogic learning opportunities for students. This is where the MVLE can make significant improvements. As Laurillard et al (1999) indicate, different resources and approaches to teaching and learning might better afford the opportunities to adopt new paradigmatic approaches to the process of learning. E-learning allows a responsiveness to individual learning styles and can create a more accessible environment to enable the interactivity between students and lecturers that is needed to construct and deconstruct knowledge.

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E-learning is not inherently more likely to provide good educational experiences than lecture theatre based or distance learning based courses. Much depends on how well the distinctive opportunities associated with e-learning are exploited. In an analysis of on-line courses in Mason (1998) it was noted that most on-line courses failed to exploit properly the medium's potential. In Mason's study most of the on-line courses adopted either a 'content and support' approach or 'wrap around' approach to education. The 'content and support' approach involved material being presented on-line, often in the form of lecture notes to students. The material was then supplemented by face-to-face tutorial support. According to Mason (1998) the actual amount of on-line interaction in this approach was low and typically involved no more than 20% of the student's learning time. The 'content and support' mode failed to exploit the electronic medium, but saw it merely as a means to facilitate the transmission of traditional lecture material. The 'wrap around' approach made greater use of the electronic medium. It involved the course materials being wrapped by activities such as on-line asynchronous discussions and real time synchronous exchanges. However, whilst the approach made greater use of virtual learning exchanges, it still largely reproduced pedagogic teaching methods. The learning remained teacher led and largely lecture based with only one route through the material for all students who were on-line.

As a result of the shortfalls of both the 'content and support' approach or the 'wrap around' approach to offer any major learning advances, attention has more recently focussed on what Mason (1998) described as an 'integrated e-learning' approach. This model of learning is more resource based and discursive. Learning is facilitated by the provision of a range of resources for students to access, greater use of collaborative activities, guest speakers, discussions, joint presentations and contributions to lectures by students and lecturers. Rather than students revolving around the higher education institution, the approach involves the institution revolving around its students (Susman, 1999), catering for a range of individual student learning needs and facilitating construction and deconstruction of knowledge through interactivity and self directed learning. The range of activity afforded through the integrated e-learning approach allows students to study in a manner that is compatible with their learning styles. Honey and Mumford's (1986) activists were exposed to a range of activities and provided with opportunities to 'bounce ideas' off others using the communication affordances of the MVLE. Pragmatists were integrated into a virtual environment where they could try out new learning. A number of new software products are increasingly available to guide students through virtual scenarios and situations that replicate real life and work contexts (Cooner, 1999 & 2001; Institute of Race Relations, 2003). Theorists were able to use the delayed nature of on-line interaction to explore links between ideas and situations. Asynchronous discussion boards involve time delayed debate, and allowed discussions to be revisited, particularly suited the theorist learners. Reflectors benefited from the networked learning and exchanges that provided opportunities for reflectors to give considered responses to issues raised, and to carefully consider and review the points raised by others in a way that conventional lecture theatre based learning rarely afforded.

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Integrated e-learning approaches have only recently begun to make a significant impact in higher education as institutions have come to appreciate that e-learning should not be confined as an additional resource to supplement existing educational approaches, nor should it simply replicate existing educational pedagogy. The narrow use of e-learning through 'content and support' or 'wrap around' approaches has consistently failed to make an impact (Mayes, 2001). However as a tool for effecting student led, student focussed andragogic educational experiences, integrated approaches to e-learning offer creative and exciting new affordances that can be exploited by educators and students.

Practical Affordances

In addition to the unique ability of integrated e-learning to facilitate new approaches to adult teaching and learning there are considerable practical affordances. The first of these, relevant to the probation diploma programme discussed later, is the ability within e-learning to allow students to transcend geography and attain critical mass to facilitate learning. In the North Wales context, integrated e-learning allowed students who were geographically dispersed across a wide rural area to become a 24/7 educational community sharing ideas, experiences and knowledge. It also afforded the opportunity for first language Welsh speakers to interact together in their first language. Welsh speaking students are a geographically dispersed group making up 20% of the Wales population. Traditional teaching methods adopted prior to 2001 meant that the Welsh speaking trainee probation officer students were considerably disadvantaged in Wales having to access resources, lectures, tutorial support or undertake discussion through their second language of English. The introduction of integrated e-learning from 2001 onwards however, allowed the students to meet together regularly and undertake learning in Welsh, to access material that had been translated into Welsh and placed on-line, converse and liaise with Welsh speaking tutors and generally to observe their nationality and identity respected in the MVLE. The virtual environment is not confined to geographical limitations, so it is relatively easy to achieve a viable critical mass to facilitate a range of similar educational, supportive communities and student groups. For instance, a black student's forum was proposed so that black students who might be geographically isolated could benefit from more specific peer and tutor support.

The second significant affordance associated with e-learning arises from the flexibility and accessibility inherent to the medium. E-learning affords students the opportunity to study at a time and place that is most convenient. Whilst the same opportunities arise from correspondence based distance learning, this is without the additional benefit of students contributing to asynchronous discussions or accessing archived synchronous discussions they may have missed. Unlike traditional teaching held in lecture theatres, students cannot miss a lecture because of illness, cars breaking down, having to work, or look after others. The on-line material is always available. This flexibility is particularly welcomed by students in rural settings who often have long and difficult journeys to make to attend University, and by students from low socio-economic backgrounds who are increasingly forced to miss lectures as they have to work to avoid the burden of escalating student loans.

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On the Diploma in Probation Studies course in particular, which combined academic study with work based learning, students were not prevented from accessing important experiential work-based learning opportunities for NVQ purposes, by having to attend lectures at a physical location at a set time and place each week. If the student was away from home for a few days/weeks, or even abroad in another country, they could access the MVLE from anywhere in the world via any PC with internet capability.

The third affordance associated with e-learning is that it can allow students with special needs to access fully the educational experience. In the UK more than 4% of students have a recognised disability, though some believe a more accurate figure is nearer 10% (Newell, 1999). Students with a range of different impairments can exploit the benefits of technology to achieve an equality of education experience. For example, a student with a hearing impairment may not always hear what is said in the lecture theatre. They may be quiet and lack confidence to speak aloud in a seminar group, but in the MVLE they will not miss any discussions or lectures and can more easily contribute in group discussions. Students who have dyslexia, or visual impairment have often felt excluded within lecture theatre based or correspondence learning, however, voice recognition software, keyboard command systems and inherent abilities in visual display equipment to change screen colour and font sizes, make e-based learning more accessible to these students. Unlike face-to-face discussion e-learning debates are less affected by the writer's age, gender, race, appearance or disability.

Finally there are practical financial affordances integral to e-learning. The issue of cost is a vexed one because assessing the true costs and benefits of e-based learning is no easy matter. The amount of training and the cost to participate on a MVLE course is minimal for those students who are already Internet ready and familiar with browsing the World Wide Web. However, for students new to computers and the Internet, there are a number of costs studying on-line - the cost of buying computers; subscribing to an Internet Service Provider; acquiring training for e-learning; and obtaining technical support. These costs must be set against the travel time saved, the travel cost saved, the IT skills developed, the wider participation and the flexibility enabled. Some studies suggest that the savings achieved by on-line learning, to institutions, service purchasers and students, are likely to be considerable. In a cost analysis of one training programme that was delivered on-line Salmon (2001) identified that the savings were in the region of 60-75% compared to face-to-face delivery with no discernible loss of quality. The reduced costs are likely to make a range of training and education programmes more attractive to students from a wider range of backgrounds, and to organisations and companies who may otherwise be prevented from investing in the continuing professional development of staff.

Reflections on an Integrated E-Learning Programme

Having contextualised the development of e-learning and some of the educational and practical affordances for learning that are integral to the medium, the following section reviews one programme that sought to harness the potential of integrated e-learning. The

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following section describes the on-line delivery of the Diploma in Probation Studies in North and Mid Wales from 2001 onwards, and some of the challenges faced by those implementing the course. It presents qualitative feedback from thirteen students who undertook the course. Conclusions are drawn from their feedback about the experience of e-learning and its potential for future deployment.

When the National Probation Service embarked on a massive increase in trainee probation officer (TPO) numbers in 2001, Sheffield Hallam University, who held the contract for the delivery of the Diploma in Probation Studies in Wales, were asked by the Probation Consortium to consider an alternative mechanism for delivery that would address two important issues: the stress of TPOs having to travel across the whole of Wales to be taught in Newport, South Wales, and to ensure first language speaking TPOs could study through the medium of Welsh. After careful consideration of these issues they opted for an e-learning approach to delivering the course in the North and Mid Wales areas. On-line delivery was supplemented by structured workshops integral to the learning, held three times a year at the University of Wales, NEWI, Wrecsam. Thirty-eight Trainee Probation Officers (TPOs) began the e-learning based route in two separate cohorts, the first in 2001 and a second in 2002. TPOs were provided with desktop computers, a dedicated phone line with internet access at their home addresses. An initial training event was held for the TPOs at a central location to introduce students to the MVLE 'Blackboard'.

At an early point attempts were made to integrate work-based staff into the MVLE - this included consortium training managers, mentors and practice development assessors assigned to TPOs. The intention was to create a 'community of practice' (Lave, 1997) which regularly engages in shared learning, based on common interests. The interaction that typically occurs within communities of practice allows new members to become socialised through interaction, into the organisational culture and values of the community. It was intended that establishing this on-line community would encourage andragogic vicarious learning on the part of TPOs as they engaged with more experienced colleagues who could offer different perspectives on the practice related issues that would arise. In the event however, work-based staff did not engage with the MVLE as was intended. This created limitations to the level of integration that could be achieved through the new medium. The lack of engagement appears to have arisen from lack of access to the internet at work locations, and from the demands on training staff at a time of rapid change and increase in TPO numbers.

Whilst students adapted quickly to on-line lectures and discussions, some immediate challenges did emerge related to the unrealistic expectations students set for their own involvement in the MVLE. Whereas in classroom interactions students traditionally have not worried unduly if they failed to grasp, contribute to, hear, or understand some part of a lecture, in the on-line environment students tended to become over anxious over small sections of on-line lectures or discussions if they did not understand. Any IT technical difficulty also led to exaggerated heightened anxiety. For example, if the server was down

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for a few hours, or they had software compatibility problems or they could not work out how to add an attachment to a message, then students often began to panic. While technical challenges did arise for students particularly in the first three months of the course the problems that arose were no greater in significance or frequency than the problems that routinely arise with any medium of education and teaching. In traditional teaching the lecture theatre might sometimes be double booked, the lecturer may be off sick or away, the student may miss a bus or train, may have the wrong information about the location of the lecture etc. In correspondence based learning the material might not get posted on time, stapled or photocopied correctly, might get lost in the post or might not be delivered before the student left for work. Interestingly, similar on-line glitches are less well tolerated. It seems on-line learning has to meet a much higher standard. Early resolution of these initial issues was required and students were encouraged to lower their expectations of themselves and the on-line medium to more reasonable levels associated with traditional educational standards. Students had to be mentored to remember that as in traditional learning environment, in on-line learning not everything discussed by fellow students, or staff would be interesting to them and require comment, not every class has to be attended, some practical problems would arise and they might not grasp everything straight away.

In the early stages of e-learning it was evident from student interaction with each other that TPOs had concerns about their abilities to engage with on-line learning and the new student led philosophy integral to the medium. The TPOs went through similar stages of interactivity with on-line learning as identified by Salmon (1999). He identified early interactions within e-learning as typically anxiety provoking and concerned with the practicalities of e-learning and the basics of sending and receiving messages and accessing material. Thereafter students enter a stage of informal tentative information exchange. This forms the basis for two later stages wherein deeper level learning can take place - the stages of knowledge construction and development. In the knowledge construction stage students begin to help each other to understand material and interact more freely. In the developmental stage students challenge each other more confidently and initiate debates rather than simply respond to them. Very similar developmental phases can be discerned from an analysis of the evolution of the on-line Diploma in Probation Studies programme over the two years. The stages students progressed through also bore significant similarities to the better known 'forming, storming, norming and performing' stages of group formation described by Tuckman (1965). As students progressed through the stages, early anxieties and behaviour gave way and lead to more balanced and considered on-line learning and exchanges. The introduction of Learning Sets within the areas they worked also helped bind the TPOs to the new medium. Some sets not only met on a face-to-face basis but also synchronously and asynchronously within the MVLE itself. The 'blended' learning afforded by a combination of e-learning, structured workshops, learning sets and work based practice with service mentors (PDAs) each contributed to the integration of the overall learning environment. First language Welsh speaking TPOs were for the first time able to be taught through the medium of Welsh, engage on the MVLE in Welsh, participate in Welsh medium Learning Sets and receive Tutorial support from a Welsh

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speaking Criminal Justice academic. This provision helped ensure greater equality of opportunity to Welsh speaking TPOs.

Student Perception of the On-line Learning Experience

In order to explore the student (TPOs) experience, a small pilot study was conducted which sought the opinions and experiences of all the TPOs currently involved in the e-learning programme. A questionnaire was sent to all the students with an accompanying letter explaining the objectives of the study - to obtain feedback on how they had experienced on-line learning and how well, or otherwise, they thought that the medium had provided for their education and facilitated their learning. All respondents were assured that their responses would be collated and anonymised by a single tutor, and the names of respondents would not be circulated any further. The overall response rate was around 35% with 13 TPOs responding to the request for information. Clearly the views obtained may not necessarily represent the views of the total trainee group, and tend to heavily represent the first cohort intake who were at the time in the final phase of their study. However, the responses raise some interesting perceptions about the experience of on-line learning.

When asked to rate their IT capability before starting the DipPS, and then at present, the results were as follows:

| N = 13 | Excellent +2 | Good +1 | Reasonable 0 | Poor -1 | V. Poor -2 | Points Score |
|---------|-----------------|------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Before | 0 | 3 | 7 | 3 | 0 | 0pts |
| Present | 1 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 0 | +12pts |

Students had varying degree of IT experience prior to the course:

Had never ever been on the Internet before!

Finding my way around, applying attachments and adding programmes such as Adobe Acrobat was an absolute nightmare

I had reasonable skills...I have previously attended a Computer Awareness Course

The majority of students have improved their IT capabilities;

My Knowledge of MS Word has increased....the Internet... I am also familiar with other packages such as PowerPoint and Publisher due to the time I have spent using the computer

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The course has given me confidence to find my way around a computer - this will be of great use to me in the future

I now consider myself to be good in relation to IT ability due to a progression in Learning and experience. I feel fairly confident in accessing all information and there has been a remarkable improvement in the speed of writing reports/essays.

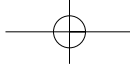
Students were asked to describe their attitude towards on-line learning before starting the course and their attitude now that they are near the end of the degree

| N = 13 | Very Positive +2 | Positive +1 | Indifferent 0 | Negative -1 | Very Negative -2 | Points Score |
|---------|---------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Before | 3 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 | +13pts |
| Present | 2 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 0 | +12pts |

Most of the students commented that they had applied for the programme because they were aware that an on-line route was available and it afforded them flexibility in their studies. Though two students were indifferent and negative about e-learning at the beginning of their studies, primarily because they had little idea as to what would be entailed by learning on-line, asked to account for any changes, they had come to better appreciate the flexibility of the e-learning system and the ability afforded for students to keep in touch. One commented:

I have been able to keep in touch with colleagues, other students and tutors all the time, without having to travel every day, which has saved me lots of time and incurring financial problems. Also I have been able to use this time to collect my children from school, without having to pay for extra child care

One of the students that rated their attitude as more negative since undertaking e-learning related this to their experience of the medium as isolating commenting: 'my TPO period has found this method of teaching to be extremely isolating and at some points very de-motivating'. The other expressed disappointment that the medium had not offered the total experience they were expecting: 'I thought all materials would be supplied and available on-line'



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Students were asked to identify the main benefits advantages from their experience of on-line learning. A wide range of benefits were identified:

Increased computer literacy

Greater access to contact and discuss with tutors

Engage in learning at any time and any place

Opportunity to work from home

Save on travelling costs

Ability to revisit lectures and debates

Chart personal development by looking back over previous contributions and discussions

Access web links

Fulfil caring duties at home

Ability to receive quick feedback and peer responses

Evening and weekend working

Reduced stress levels

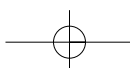
Inclusive approach to diverse student needs

Ability to pose questions on line

Exchange materials, ideas and web resources with other students

The benefit of being able to adapt the learning environment to suit the students own personal circumstances and preferred learning style was highlighted by one student who stated:

I feel the course helps people with learning difficulties. I can't concentrate for very long and get very irritable in lectures, especially when they go on all day. I also get confused at times when at the end of lectures the tutor can't wait to get away and gives you some garbled answer to your queries.... By learning on-line if you email a tutor with a query, they email back their responses which means everything is more clearly explained in black and



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white, including lectures. Also you can go at your own pace and take regular breaks... Having things on a medium such as Blackboard, you can go and look over previous virtual classroom comments and use tips in assignment times even if you weren't available for that classroom.

The students were also asked to identify challenges and drawbacks in respect of their experience of on-line learning. The range of answers were much less broad:

Comments/questions [on blackboard] have not been responded to

Felt cut off from the world

It's difficult [on-line] to discuss ideas you don't understand

preferred more time to familiarise myself with the [Blackboard] system

The main drawback of e-learning in my opinion is the isolation

Difficult at times to motivate myself ... lonely

Feeling of isolation which could lead to irrational thoughts/fears

The need to think carefully about every posting made

I had to close my study door at Christmas to make myself take a break from it

Despite the intensive on-line social interaction on the MVLE, eight students commented that they felt isolated at times and linked this to the loss of face-to-face contact. Three also commented that they felt unable to contribute to some debates because the discussion board recorded their comments for all time and this created some caution and fear. The issue of isolation is a recurring criticism of courses that are resource based and promote constructivist student led learning. Many students are not well prepared to engage assertively with the flexibility that such courses provide when the educational experiences to date have tended to be didactic directed teaching approaches. This raises issues for the course providers in terms of providing initial opportunities for students to understand, clarify and make a formal commitment to a new approach to learning. Though it seems that e-learning in this study was successful in encouraging interactivity and co-presence, the main concern from students was the absence of physical face-to-face contact with staff and students. The reasons for this are readily quantifiable. Most people crave human intimacy and physical contact with others, the virtual world can provide social interaction but it will never replicate physical face-to-face discussion. Information gathering and processing is partly predicated upon physical appearances and the presence or absence of non-verbal cues, gestures or body language. Whilst virtual interaction provides new forms

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of social relations, an inevitable consequence is that virtual social interactions will be regarded as incomplete in the absence of physical proximity and contact. But as the use of the internet increases however, it is likely that an acceptance of new forms of relations will be developed that may one day be experienced as different, though equally as meaningful as those predicated upon physicality. The fairly recent proliferation of chat rooms and dating rooms on the World Wide Web is already testament to people's ability to adapt and utilise the internet to establish significant relationships. The increasing use of emoticons to replicate non verbal cues on-line, and the use of capitals for instance to express anger or shouting, illustrates the evolution of new forms of communications to generate depth in virtual communication. In the future then virtual education should continue to evolve and eventually come to acquire the legitimacy of face-to-face education.

In the final question of the pilot study the students were invited through an open question to make general comments about their experience of e-learning. They were nearly all positive and expressed overall satisfaction with e-learning. The following comments were typical:

e-learning offers me the best chance of successfully passing this course

It has been a positive learning experience which suited my learning style

My overall opinion of the system is very positive

It has strong advantages for me

Enjoyed the experience of e-learning and would consider such a form of study again

I've enjoyed the experience and I would rather do it again this way than attend lectures at college/university every week

Two students were less positive about their experiences however:

I would prefer the traditional method of learning as I feel it is more structured and better suits my learning style

I would carefully consider participating in future on line learning due to the isolation felt whilst studying...the chat room is not the same

Assessing the overall impact e-learning had on the learning that occurred is not a simple matter. The comments of students taken as a whole however suggest that the absence of physical contact was hard for students to get used to, though for most students it did not undermine educational experience. In addition, it is worth documenting that preliminary

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analyses suggest that the drop out rate or results of on-line students were no worse than those of their peers taught face-to-face. Indeed, the results of students who pursued the course on-line show some slight superiority to students who pursued the exact same modules taught face-to-face. The results below were marked by the same tutors, standardised by the same external examiners and processed through the same assessment boards.

| Teaching through Blackboard- Initial Findings | | | |
|--|--------------|----------|----------|
| | On-line % | F2F % | F2F % |
| Criminology | 60 | 58 | 53 |
| Psychology | 68 | 56 | 58 |
| Social Policy | 59 | 57 | 54 |
| Values and Ethics | 55 | 56 | 58 |
| Orientation to CJ | 55 | 57 | 53 |
| Average | 59.6 | 56.8 | 55.2 |

Conclusions

This paper has sought to describe, contextualise and document the experience of e-learning. It has argued that the interactivity and responsivity, integral to e-learning, are significant opportunities to enhance the learning environment. It has been argued that these opportunities can be utilised through integrated e-learning, to resource and facilitate the kind of student focussed and student directed learning that is consonant with the emerging consensus around effective educational practices. It has been further argued that through the creation of critical mass and technological adaptations to diverse needs, e-learning better provides equality of access and opportunity to a greater range of students enabling them to access and fully participate in higher education. This study illustrated how the on-line learning experience was particularly able to address issues of rurality and language. The qualitative pilot study suggests e-learning was largely a positive and enabling experience for students, There was also some evidence that educational standards were at least maintained, possibly improved. This paper concludes therefore that there is a longer term future for e-learning within higher education. The benefits of e-learning are not automatic or inherent. Successful e-learning needs to be based on andragogic, constructivist strategies to student learning as opposed to based on established pedagogies that are well enough served in the physical lecture theatre and in correspondence based distance learning. However, the students' comments record that whilst internet use is growing, a balance still needs to be struck between some integration of on-line and face-to-face contact in the future, and that blended learning opportunities are still likely to be required to respond to the wide range of student needs.

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