A Dual Perspective on an Online University Course

Jörgen Lindh and Carol-Ann Soames
Jönköping International Business School, Sweden
lijo@jibs.hj.se
soca@jibs.hj.se

Abstract: This study investigates how students and their teacher experience online courses and whether both parties perceive similar advantages and disadvantages in online learning. Both parties consider geographical independence advantageous and express the need for a well-structured course; this includes the administration as well as the content. Individual learning styles and approaches to learning play an important part in achieving success; students' computer skills and technical knowledge may also affect a successful outcome.

Keywords: e-Learning, online courses, perspectives, communication

1. Introduction

Our study investigates how students and their teacher experienced an online course. We were interested to learn whether both parties perceived similar advantages and disadvantages in online learning.

An online course at Jönköping International Business School (JIBS) has been scrutinized from two perspectives. The course chosen for investigation was Business English Online (BUENGON 1), which was running for the second time since autumn 2001. The platform used was the school's intranet called JIBSNet, developed to handle administration of all the courses, and to provide some facilities for communication between teachers and students. Students chose the business English online course because no meetings were arranged. The intranet served as the meeting place, and tasks were uploaded at regular intervals.

The surge in e-business and e-Learning requires new thinking about how we acquire knowledge and skills to meet the knowledge economy. This places a demand on higher education and corporations to equip knowledge workers with lifelong learning skills. Key skills, such as communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn, according to the recommendations set by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE, Recommendations 17 and 21) are necessary in order to foster flexibility, initiative, creativity, problem solving and openness to change. The use of communication and information technologies (C&IT) is being used to meet this challenge (Maier & Warren, 2001).

Since the Internet is largely a text-based medium, and that written communication in e-commerce can make the competitive difference in organizational success (Booher, 2001), the focus of the business English online course was on developing students' writing skills.

JIBSNet at present does not support any other forms of interaction other than offer a place for reading course-related materials and uploading text. Therefore, an overarching aim was to develop students' electronic literacies (Warschauer, 2000).

2. Method

One student who had enrolled on the course, offered to provide the student perspective. The opportunity also served to gather material for his master's thesis. This student's supervisor was one of the authors of this paper; his online teacher was the other. The supervisor gave advice on how to perform the pre-course online questionnaire, where the aim was to determine all the students' attitude to distance learning. One reason for not using interviews was partly because it was an easy way of reaching the students as they used IT as a tool during the course. Another reason was that not all the students lived in the vicinity. After the course, it was of relevance to conduct a follow-up questionnaire to find out why half the students enrolled, had dropped out. In parallel, and independently of one another, the teacher evaluated the course from her perspective.

3. Results

The number of places available on the BUENGON course is twenty, but only nineteen started. The pre-course questionnaire asked students about their home/work life, any previous experience of distance learning and their level of computer skills. Most of the students lived locally, whilst others were working abroad; they chose the course to

complement their work, and a third had prior experience of distance study.

3.1   Student Perspective

The follow-up questionnaire asked for learners' perceptions of the course and whether the medium suited them. Students thought that the delivery of the course enabled flexibility. In fact all the students that passed the course, found that the design of the course made it more flexible (Totally agree = 9, Agree in a great extent = 1).

Those who successfully completed the course had good computer skills and were even more positive to new technology. Of the nineteen students who started the course, only ten of them finished. The nine students who dropped out gave the following reasons, as shown in Table 1

Table 1: Give reason(s) why you left the course. (Question 6)

Reasons	Frequency
I got more work in my ordinary job.	1
I wanted to work with the English course during the evenings but found it was not possible because of the many group works.	1
The design of the course didn't suit me.	3
I realized that distance learning was not for me.	3
I felt that I didn't manage to study by distance. Didn't get anything, but thought everything was a mess, and besides I felt that I didn't get enough time	1
Total	9

They also found that JIBSNet was a good platform for interaction between students and tutor. To the question "Do you think the web platform (JIBSNet) has contributed to enhancing the course pedagogically? 4 students answered "Yes" and 5 answered, "To a certain extent".

The majority of the students found that the delivery was not appropriate for them. Conversely, it could be said that the student does not suit the course, or more generally: some students do not suit these types of courses. Of course the question then is raised about different learning styles (see Table 2).

Table 2: Which of the following learning styles describes you? (Question 11)

Learning styles	Disagree	Agree partly	Agree	Agree very much	Agree fully	Total
Visual, learn new information through text and picture.	0	0	2	5	2	9
Auditory, learn through listening and speaking.	0	3	1	2	3	9
Logical, learn information through experiment and pattern.	0	0	2	4	3	9
Spatial, learn new information through painting and creating.	3	4	2	0	0	9
Kinaesthetic, learning new information through the body.	5	4	0	0	0	9
Group, take in new information through working in a group, comparing and relating to other people's experience	0	2	4	2	1	9
Individual, take in new information through one's own work and by following one's own feelings	0	0	0	3	6	9

As can be seen from Table 2, in the column Agree very much, a learning style that incorporates visual aspects seems to be most appropriate when reading an online course, at least as far as our study indicates (five students). Also logical attributes turn out to be important (four students).

Most important for these students was being able to work and learn individually. This could largely account for why these students left the

course as they may have felt thwarted by all the group work tasks.

Of the remaining ten who completed the course, students benefited from the flexibility of the delivery and considered the platform a useful place to house all course matters. They also appreciated communicating via the discussion forum (see Table 3).

Table 3: Statements regarding the course (Question 12)

General statements about the course	Disagree	Agree partly	Agree	Agree very much	Agree fully	Total
Course design has enabled flexibility in my studies, both geographically and in time	0	0	0	1	9	10
Platform has improved communications with other students	1	0	5	2	2	10
Platform has improved communications with tutor	1	1	6	1	1	10
Has been easy to use and understand.	0	0	1	3	6	10
Tasks have been easy to understand and follow	0	2	4	3	1	10

The major problem they had were difficulties in understanding the written instructions to the set assignments, which they considered unclear, and confusing. The group work tasks also proved to be a bone of contention.

Some students would have preferred to work on their own because few were willing to take the initiative in forming and maintaining contact with their groups. A face-to-face meeting would have been welcome to create a learning community.

3.2   Teacher perspective

The frustration and stress related to delivering the first two offerings of the BUENGON courses were a result from lack of time and lack of coordination between the various administration bodies. The overall look and feel of the interface was dull and static. The tutor uploaded material, which the students downloaded. Lesson plans were being written and then revised as the course progressed; therefore it was not possible to give students advance notice of the assignments.

Another difficulty and source of bafflement was students' responses, or lack of them. Students seemingly did not understand instructions; they wanted to seek personal clarification with the tutor; they had problems communicating with their group. However, the small changes in presentation of material, which in essence remained the same, changed its focus on what the tutor was preparing to what the student needed to know to be able to do the tasks. Once the materials had been written, and the design of the course put up on JIBSNet, it was possible to focus on the communication and interaction between the learners and tutor.

The activities for assessment were group-based with some assignments which could be performed individually. This was to allow for different learning preferences. The discussion forum primarily was to nurture an online community, with a secondary function of providing the tutor with evidence of student activity.

Students' emails to the tutor seeking clarification to certain tasks provided valuable feedback on how well the course content was presented. Problems perceived concerned the structure and schedule. Confusion was caused by the heading descriptors in the menu on the webpage, which used the week numbers. Students were uncertain about the deadlines. Should the assignment be submitted during a particular week, or were they meant to be working on it that week?

Based on the guidelines format in Horton (2000), more detail was given about the steps to take in doing the worksheets and about the discussion list. Yet instead of clarity there was still some confusion because there was too much detail, such as reminders for when the previous assignments were due.

Another factor that has contributed to the clarity is adding information about the worksheet/lesson plan, etc in the header of each document to be downloaded. Each page can now be identified. This is a small detail easily overlooked when preparing Word documents (even adding pagination can be forgotten). "Tinkering with the presentation of information can dramatically improve its stickiness", as Gladwell points out in *Tipping Point*, (Gladwell, 2000). As a result, students on the third BUENGON offering said in the evaluation that the information about the course contents and goals was very good (6.5; max 7). There were very few emails requesting clarity on the tasks.

Interestingly enough, students claimed that misunderstandings would be more easily rectified in the classroom which would allow instant feedback. Yet campus students tend

not to follow instructions implicitly because they are relying on the verbal instruction despite having been given it in writing, which would then be subject to various interpretations and assumptions. On the whole, online learners completed the tasks satisfactorily because they had only the same written source.

Instead the problem lay in getting students to form study groups. From the onset, students were to form their own groups so that they would be encouraged to make contact with as many participants as possible.

In the course evaluation, there was some dissatisfaction in doing group work as expressed by this comment:

> I am afraid that the "working in a group"-thing took much time and gave very little. Trying to get in touch with my group and getting any answers from them at all has taken a lot of time and the waiting without anything happening was very annoying. I can understand that the thought was well meant, but the result was just frustration and a lot of time wasted on waiting for things (e-mails, suggestions, tasks) that never came. I hope it worked out better in the other groups.

To counterbalance this though, was this comment:

> I also want to say that my group has worked great, we have all answered right away by email which is really important for the group to stick together. We will also try to find a day to meet for a beer, just to meet IRL.

Ideally collaborative learning should encourage learners to rely on one another for gathering, evaluating and presenting information, taking responsibility, and being more active. The benefits for the tutor of learners sharing "knowledge and the burden of learning", (Horton, 2000) are that it is possible to monitor without too much interference, and not be the sole evaluator. Furthermore, working in small groups is a practical means of class management, whether Face-to-Face (F2F) or in a virtual classroom. Marking group assignments eases the burden instead of giving each individual a quick-turnaround in feedback. For the online course, written communication was the major means of

providing feedback, which was particularly time-consuming and stressful as the tutor was only allocated the same number of teaching hours as for a campus course.

Some students enjoy close contact with the tutor and engage in an intense email exchange on a one-on-one basis. Unlike the traditional classroom setting, where a student would be considered as dominating the class discussion to the possible annoyance of other students, or feel inhibited in disclosing uncertainties, misunderstandings, etc., the student engaged in emailing has privacy to air one's thoughts and can share concerns with the tutor in confidence. Findings in an article on online education, stated that "students on online courses report that they are getting more human interaction than on any other type of course" (Education Guardian, 2003). Common to all the BUENGON courses offered is that the tutor has managed to establish good contact with students through email, learning more about them than possible in the classroom.

Based on the experience so far, perhaps the tutor needs to take an even more active role in encouraging contact between students since it is not possible to rely on group dynamics in the traditional classroom. The problem is that budget constraints prohibit F2F meetings; students are not in the neighbourhood; and the delivery does not as yet support synchronous technology. If the design of the course is to include discussions and collaborative projects, then the platform must support conferencing and not just be the exchange of data (Meyer-Peyton in Lau, 2000).

4. Analysis

Online communication is becoming an integral part in education, training and business. There are two ways of viewing this development, with celebration or abhorrence. Some embrace reading and writing on the screen as being "more democratic, learner-centered, holistic and natural" (Bolter, 1991; Landham, 1993, cited in Warschauer, 1999). Others view it as a means to propagate taking a surface approach to content by clicking from one hyperlink to another, without pausing long enough to read in any depth.

Biggs points out that the interpretation of 'flexible learning' to mean uploading lecture notes on the Web because of the ease of distribution, is feared as taking a surface approach to teaching (Biggs, 1999). One of the concerns of the tutor is that discussion topics

could be mere flittings as inherent in 'chat', instead of being given in-depth treatment. Another concern is that students might view our intranet as an example of 'shovelware' ("content taken from any source and put on the Web as fast as possible with little regard for appearance and usability." www.whatis.com), and that we have joined the bandwagon,

> *"Quickly grasping its distribution possibilities, colleges and universities everywhere have rushed to move resources for courses on line. Material previously handled on paper or with slides and transparencies -- syllabi, assignments, notes, data, diagrams, references, exams -- are now presented through the computer."*
> http://fraser.cc/Talks/Chronicle.html *(Fraser, 1999)*

For this offering of BUENGON, working in groups seemed to be the biggest problem. The postgraduate student's investigation revealed that some learners wanted a minimum of instruction and examples, just details about the hand-in assignments. Others preferred to work individually and felt that the quality of the course would have been improved considerably by minimizing or even eliminating the group work. However, the teacher was concerned that the students' focus on the hand-in tasks and reluctance to work in collaboration, suggested a surface approach to learning. As summarised in Ramsden, "Learning to Teach in Higher Education", some students' intention was "only to complete task requirements", and "focus on 'the signs' (e.g. the words and sentences of the text)" (Ramsden, 1992). Whether the medium of delivery is on campus or online, it is important that activities are interactive to encourage deep learning to take place.

One of the major disadvantages for the tutor is that the form of asynchronous delivery is very labour intensive, something that the participant may not be fully aware of. It is not feasible to give individual feedback at the same time, so some student will be last in the chain. Waiting for feedback may be a reason for dropping out, as the student may feel isolated and demotivated.

To encourage commitment to the course in the hope of reducing the drop-out rate, new students should pledge that they will take responsibility for their learning, actively participate, and be flexible and tolerant.

Furthermore, they should be willing to create and foster an online community. The advantages of what electronic learning and the particular course may bring, should be clearly expressed (Horton, 2000).

However, to be able to generate income students need to be processed through the course. Unfortunately, the retention rate so far is still low, with about half of the students dropping out. The paradox is that those students who complete the course do so successfully and express their great satisfaction. It seems to be a case of all or nothing. Either the students thoroughly enjoy the course and benefit, or they disappear.

Although teachers and students are becoming more familiar with the use of computers in education, yet there is still the need for face-to-face contact (Biggs, 1999). Despite all the seeming advantages of holding computer-assisted conversations, there is the yearning for human contact. Flexible learning is still too new, and educators and learners need to adjust to the new technologies as well as the new forms of electronic reading and writing.

5. Conclusions

Lessons learned from this experience are that it is important to establish a virtual place where students can meet to work together on group assignments in privacy, and that they need a reason to come back to the web page – the content must be 'sticky'.

Geographical independence is one of the most important advantages in choosing an online course. Both the teacher and the students express the need for a well-structured course; this includes the administration as well as the content. The postgraduate student points out that the individual learning style is an important factor for success in taking part in an online course. The teacher views students' approaches to learning as a key determiner as to whether students interact with the tasks and one another, and see the course through to its end. The various levels of computer skills and technical knowledge may affect the success of following through the course. The delivery platform therefore should be easy to use, reliable and support the learning. However, if students are not required to attend live classes, then money should be invested in the platform to create good venues to allow synchronous meetings, for instance.

References

Biggs, J (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University,* Oxford University Press, p115

Booher, D (2001) *E-Writing: 21ˢᵗ Century Tools for Effective Communication*, Pocket Books

Dearing Report, (1997) "Higher Education in the Learning Society", National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, UK

Education Guardian (22 March 2003) "Success still in the distance", The Guardian, [online] http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/postgraduate/story/

Fraser, A (1999) Chronicle of Higher Education, Section: Opinion & Arts Vol. 48, pB8, Aug. 8, 1999

Gladwell, M (2000) *Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference*, Abacus, p259

Horton, W (2000) *Designing Web-based Training*, Wiley, p335, p424

Meyer-Peyton, L (2000) "Elements of a Successful Distributed Learning Program" in *Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, Trends and Opportunities*, Linda Lau (Ed), Hershley, PA, USA: Idea Group Publishing, p84

Maier, P and A Warren (2000) *Integrating Technology in Learning & Teaching*, Kogan Page McGraw-Hill

Ramsden, P (1992) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, Routledge, p46

Rosenberg, M (2001) *E-Learning Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*, New York: McGraw-Hill, p144

Warschauer, M (1999) *Electronic Literacies: Language, Culture, and Power in Online Education,* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, New Jersey

Warschauer, M (2001) "Online Communication" in *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages,* R Carter & D Nunan (Eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press