

# Keeping them involved – factors which encourage participation in online discussions on an international online training course

Bill Williams  
 Escola Superior de Tecnologia do Barreiro  
 Setubal Polytechnic  
 Barreiro  
 PORTUGAL  
<http://www.estbarreiro.ips.pt>

*Abstract:* - This paper compares participation levels in ten different three-week modules running simultaneously during a 20-week international online training course and suggests factors which contributed to high participation levels in some modules. It proposes a checklist of factors to be considered when designing such modules so as to encourage learner participation in online discussions.

*Key-Words:* - International online training; learner participation; online discussions.

## 1 Introduction

The paper describes a study of a part of an international online training course where the number of posts per week per learner was used as broad measure of learner participation and goes on to make recommendations about module design;

## 2 Background

The course was a 20-week postgraduate certificate course in online education and training offered by the Institute of Education of the University of London. It was conducted predominantly through asynchronous exchanges using the First Class computer conferencing software. A cohort of approximately 140 participants took the course and the 20 weeks were divided up as follows:

Table 1

Stage	week	organization	language	activity
1	1 – 5	local groups	local	assigned collaborative tasks
2	6 – 10	assigned to international groups	English	assigned collaborative tasks
3	11-13	learner-chosen international groups	English	various
4	14 – 20	local groups – mainly individual work after week 15	local	preparation for final paper

Although English was used throughout by groups from countries such as Britain, Africa and Hong Kong, one of the characteristics of this particular course is that groups from Portugal, Germany, Italy and Brazil could work together in their local language for approximately 50% of the course.

## 3 Online participation

Online participation has been a focus of interest from the point of view of fostering online communities of practice since John Seely Brown of PARC Xerox [1] applied the idea of the legitimate peripheral participant, originally used by Lave and Wenger [2] in the broader context of situated learning, to the study of online learning

communities. It has also received attention from the perspective of online training practitioners and facilitators [3], [4].

With regard to the design of online courses, there has been debate as to the importance of collaborative work and its relationship to learner success (for example [5]). If we accept that a collaborative approach is appropriate, then the question of course participation by learners is important.

Participation in online discussions was considered in some detail in a recent paper by Williams and Wache [6] who suggest that Heckman and Annabis's [7] generic framework for learning activities is particularly suitable when considering online discussions and they go on to suggest strategies for enhancing participation within online discussions.

Even though there have been some attempts to monitor both quantity and quality of learners' posts in online courses [8] there remains much to be done in this area from a technical point of view.

In this study, attention was confined to quantitative monitoring (counting posts) given that such data are readily accessible in a variety of online learning management systems in current use.

Although it could be argued that simply counting the number of messages does not take into account the length or quality of the messages or evidence for learning during the process, I believe it can be considered as a reasonable comparative indication of participation and involvement in the learning process in the course described, seeing as participants knew they were not being assessed on the number of posts made (assessment was based on a final paper in English and weekly learner reflections). Comments of learners interviewed tended to support this i.e. periods of the course where the numbers of posts were highest corresponded to periods when they perceived they had been learning intensively.

#### 4 Comparing online participation in Option Modules

Stage three of the course was of particular interest because by this time learners were well used to the online methodology and interface and were

working in international groups of 10 to 15 people on a content area which was either their first or second choice from 10 different options.

During this three-week stage, each group was facilitated by a tutor who was a specialist in the content area (e.g. technology, online discourse, multi-literacies, the role of the moderator), some of these also being local group tutors while others were brought in just for this portion of the course. One might expect participation levels to be broadly similar but in fact there were considerable variations between the option groups as the following table illustrates:

Table 2

Participation during three-week option modules		
Option Group	Total Messages (over 3 weeks)	Learners/group
A	630	15
B	315	15
C	167	15
D	153	15
E	111	15
F	110	13
G	75	15
H	70	14
I	46	11
J	36	11

#### 4.1 Characteristics of Modules with low numbers of posts:

1) tasks tended to be instrumental of the type *read this paper/go to these sites, then post comments here and discuss other people's comments;*

2) tasks were individualistic in their execution and were not designed to be encourage debate or collaboration;

- 3) there was no concrete outcome of the module;
- 4) the tutor had a relatively hands-off online persona;
- 5) previous experience of participants was either taken for granted or not taken into account in task design.

#### 4.2 Characteristics of Modules with high numbers of posts

- 1) there was a concrete outcome of the work (example: publication of a joint hyperlinked document/guidelines for colleagues);
- 2) the structure of the 3 weeks' work was given to the learners at the beginning, showing weekly tasks, responsibilities and final outcome;
- 3) learners entered into a form of learning contract in the beginning and were divided into sub-groups where each had a specific role – scribe, coach, librarian etc.;
- 4) the personal experience of each learner could be brought to the task (example: “describe a collaborative moment you have experienced”);
- 5) the tasks were designed to promote reflection (“identify keywords in your description of your experience”) and collaboration (“agree with colleagues on ten key words for collaborative learning”);
- 6) the tutor played a hands-on, supportive role throughout;
- 7) there were additional specific skills to be acquired/developed (creating Mindmaps, hyperlinked documents) with appropriate supporting resources.

Module A, which had the highest participation level, illustrated all seven of these characteristics while B and C exemplified the majority of them.

#### 4.3 Checklist

Based on this study I would like to suggest a checklist of factors which can be useful in encouraging learner participation when designing

online training course modules.

Table 3

CHECKLIST QUESTIONS	EXAMPLE
1) Is there a concrete outcome of the module?	Presentation to colleagues or a wider public of a resource document, webpage, Powerpoint presentation, poster;
2) Is the structure/ calendar of the work given to the learners at the beginning?	Chart with task delivery times; outline of roles of group members; final outcome specifications; assessment rubric where appropriate;
3) Is there negotiation of responsibilities and task division?	Learning contract; division into sub-groups; assignment of specific roles – scribe, coach, librarian etc.;
5) Are the tasks designed to promote reflection?	“identify keywords in your description of your experience”
6) Are the tasks designed to promote collaboration?	“agree with colleagues on ten key words”; “put the list of items in order of importance”
7) Are there any additional skills which will be acquired/developed?	mind-maps; concept maps; webpage/ hyperlinked document creation; poster layout; second language skills;
8) Does the assessment system reward participation and/or collaboration	a component of the final course grade reflects learners' participation (measured quantitatively or qualitatively); group work assessment designed so as to encourage participation
9) Are tutors encouraged and enabled to play a hands-on, supportive role throughout	corresponding remuneration/institutional timetable credit to reflect the time investment involved

## 5 Conclusion

The use of quantitative data based on the number and type of posts per week allows us to compare overall participation levels of similar groups of learners on online courses to propose suggestions of good practice in the design of online course

modules so as to encourage participation in online discussions.

2002, Retrieved 28/10/2005 from <http://wiley.ed.usu.edu/docs/discussion09.pdf>

*References:*

[1] Brown, J. S., and Duguid, P. *The Social Life of Information*, Chapter 5, Watertown MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

[2] Lave, J., and Wenger, E.. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Learning in Doing)*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

[3] Williams Bill, Participation in on-line courses – how essential is it?, *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* Vol. 7, Issue 2, April 2004, pp 1-8, , Retrieved 28/10/2005 from <http://www.ifets.info/others/issues.php?id=2>

[4] MacDonald, J., Atkin W., Daugherty F., Fox, H., MacGillivray, A., Reeves-Lipscomb, D., Uthailertaroon, P. (2003) Let's get more positive about the term 'lurker', CPsquare Foundations of Communities of Practice Workshop Retrieved 28/10/2005 from <http://www.cpsquare.org/edu/News/archives/000016.html>

[5] Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Raquel Benbunan-Fich (1997) Evaluating the Importance of Collaborative Learning in ALN's Retrieved 28/10/2005 from <http://fie.engrng.pitt.edu/fie97/papers/1004.pdf>

[6] Williams, M and Wache, D (2005) "Just link and leave" a recipe for disaster for online discussions, retrieved 28/11/2005 from <http://www.unisa.edu.au/odlaaconference/PDFs/56%20ODLAA%202005%20-%20Williams%20&%20Wache.pdf>

[7] Heckman R. and Annabi H (2005) A content analytic comparison of learning processes in online and face-to-face case study discussions. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10 (2) Article 7, retrieved 28/11/2005 from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/heckman.html>

[8] Wiley, D.. A Proposed Measure of Discussion Activity in Threaded Discussion Spaces v0.9.