

REDEFINING 'THE GROUP' IN CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS USING COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC)

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ABSTRACT

In marketing education, client-based projects set within a collaborative learning framework have a positive impact on student performance (Benbasat & Lim 1993; Ivins 1997; de los Santos & Jensen 1985; Harasim 1989; Healey et al 1996; Kolb 1998; Shanka & Napoli 2001). Despite these benefits, researchers also note the difficulties marketing educators face in recognising individual student development within this group based approach (Conway et al 1993; Dillenbourg et al 1995; Dillenbourg 1999; Razzouk & Seitz 2001). Although marketing educators' use of computer mediated communication (CMC) has increased significantly (Siegel 2000; Lincoln 2001; Westhead 1999), very little empirical evidence exists to define the role of online technologies in creating a collaborative learning environment with individual assessment using client-based projects.

To address this gap, this paper explores the individual role of students in collaborative learning by positing that individual students working on client-based projects can derive the same benefits as teams of students when an online learning environment supplements the group process. This discussion proposes that a much deeper level of collaborative learning can occur in a group of more than 200 students when the class becomes 'the group'. Finally, this paper poses a set of research and educational initiatives to refine our understanding of the application of computer mediated technologies in client-based projects.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The onset of the online teaching and learning environment has brought with it a wealth of literature on the merits and application of this environment to a number of traditional teaching and learning approaches from enhancing classroom discussion through to supporting experiential and problem-based learning approaches with evidence that a problem-oriented and dialogue-based e-learning approach holds substantial potential for global marketing education (Mitry & Smith, 2002).

This paper seeks to explore the application of the online teaching and learning environment to client-

based projects by redefining the traditional boundaries of the team approach which has underpinned this teaching approach through the use of computer mediated communication (CMC).

It does this through exploring the collaboration that exists within a unit that combines both a skills and planning component in a School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations in which the class as a whole becomes 'the group' working towards a marketing communication plan and written portfolio for a client-based project.

CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS AND ONLINE TECHNOLOGY

Client based projects are a well-established marketing education tool that allow educators to apply pedagogical perspectives in the classroom (Razzouk & Rizkallah 2002) and prepare students for their transition into business (de los Santos & Jensen 1985). These real-life marketing projects, usually undertaken in teams, have a positive impact on student performance (Ivins 1997; de los Santos & Jensen 1985) and make students more competitive in the job market (Razzouk & Rizkallah 2002).

Although positive outcomes are also delivered to students in terms of their understanding of group communication and teamwork skills (Healey et al 1996; Kolb 1998; Shanka & Napoli 2001), some students prefer to work alone (Razzouk & Seitz 2001). Research to date also suggests the group-based nature of client projects presents both administrative and grading issues for marketing educators. It is difficult for educators to find and set up meaningful projects (Razzouk & Rizkallah 2002) and when educators struggle to assign individual grades, a common response is to grade equally all members of the team (Conway et al 1993).

To resolve some of the teaching and learning aspects of client-based projects, marketing educators have turned to the Web (Siegel 2000; Lincoln 2001; Westhead 1999). Although Jorgensen (2003) suggests students are becoming more accustomed to a technologically rich environment, very little empirical evidence exists to discuss student and educator outcomes.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how CMC has impacted on redefining 'the group' or team approach to client-based projects.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND ONLINE TECHNOLOGY

An equally well-established educational approach, collaborative learning shares similar group versus individual performance and educator administration issues to client-based projects. Collaborative learning exists when people work together to create meaning, explore a topic, and improve skills (Graham & Scarborough 1999). Within this context, the degree of interaction is determined by the extent to which the interaction influences students' cognitive processes (Dillenbourg 1999). Educational research identifies student interaction as a critical variable in learning and cognitive development (Harasim 1989) yet from an educators' perspective, Dillenbourg et al (1995) found that it is difficult to set up initial conditions which guarantee the effectiveness of collaborative learning.

Although Graham & Scarborough (1999) argue that collaborative learning maintains individual accountability through a learner-centered model and Dillenbourg (1999) suggests that teaching mechanisms in collaborative settings are similar to those involved in individual cognition, most collaborative learning research neglects a focus on the role of the individual in this process.

Equally, collaborative learning in online settings doesn't clearly focus on the role of the individual. However, research to date identifies these benefits of collaborative learning in online settings: equal access and participation from a technical perspective (Benbasat & Lim 1993; Cecez & Webb 2000) and a permanent and accessible record of student interactions (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb 2000) through the transcripts of online discussion forums to evaluate and further refine teaching and learning approaches.

The interactive nature of online discussion groups offers significant opportunities to educators and learners. Online discussions facilitate collaborative learning by emphasizing the positive effects of information sharing (Harasim 1989), and offer increased flexibility in time and place of learning (Bates 1995; Harasim et al 1995).

This paper explores the individual role of students in collaborative learning by positing that individual students working on client based projects can derive the same benefits of teams of students when an

online learning environment supplements the group process. This model proposes that a much deeper level of collaborative learning can occur in a group of more than 200 students when the class becomes the group.

OVERVIEW OF CLIENT-BASED UNIT

The online teaching technology under investigation in this paper supports a client-based project comprising both a skills-based and strategic component for second year marketing and public relations students. The advent of online teaching technology has replaced a groupwork approach with an individual approach to this client-based unit. This decision matches the students' stage of development at a time when they have limited technical (writing) and strategic (planning) skills. On a technical level, it is deemed that each student can best develop marketing communication writing skills to meet the client's need on their own. Group writing tasks risk complacency in some team members. Similarly, as the base planning unit, students are required to learn and apply the components of a strategic planning framework at an individual level.

However, the challenge in teaching this unit at an individual level has come with large class sizes. Student numbers have increased from 70 to almost 300. This increase coincided with a Faculty initiative to embed online teaching technologies to support teaching and learning outcomes at the university. An online teaching site was designed to immerse students into the client project, facilitate discussion amongst students, lecturers and the client, and provide samples of marketing communication writing pieces and strategic plans. The online teaching site adopted the 'look and feel' of the client's website by incorporating both design and content elements from the client's website. Students were given access to client background information, a move which encouraged students to spend time on developing writing and planning skills rather than researching the information itself.

To maintain consistency across the class, the online discussion forums were developed around each assessment item. These forums were monitored seven days a week by the unit coordinator and acted as a resource for the tutors.

This project also overcomes one of the traditional problems of client-based projects, that being, finding enough clients to support this approach. All students in the class work on the one client project on an individual basis with the online discussion forums

bringing the students together 'as a group' as they work towards each of their assessment pieces.

METHOD

Since the widespread adoption of computer mediated communication technologies, research has focused on identifying methods of evaluating the quality of online discussion ranging from highly quantitative methods such as the use of Pitman's (1999) tracking software to more qualitative methods such as Owen's (2000) discourse analysis. While evaluation of online discussion transcripts can be time intensive, it also offers unique opportunities for evaluation (McKenzie & Murphy 2000). Features unique to the online environment allow for easy identification of the level of participation in a discussion forum based on statistics on the number of users, frequency of access, number of messages per student, the number of threads and messages per thread (Harasim, 1989). Although this information can be useful, there is a danger in concluding that the level of activity in a discussion forum reflects the level of learning (Mason, 1992 as cited in McKenzie & Murphy 2000).

McKenzie & Murphy (2000) suggest an evaluative approach where categories for analysis reflect evidence about the learning process in which the participants are engaged. It is within this approach that Henri (1992; 1993) argues for research that is grounded in a cognitive view of learning and focused on the level of knowledge and skills evident in the learners' communications through the analysis of transcripts against participative, interactive, social, cognitive and metacognitive dimensions.

Henri's (1992; 1993) framework was chosen to evaluate the effectiveness and subsequent level of collaboration of the online discussion forums in this first level marketing communication unit analysing transcripts of the unit over two semesters, one full-time day semester and one part-time night semester, to establish the level of participation and interaction in the discussion group, as well analysing the content of the messages according to a cognitive view of learning. It should be noted that only the discussion forums for the major project have been analysed for the purposes of this study as they relate back to the client project as distinct from the other forums which focus on the exam and other skill-based components of the unit's overall assessment. The major project was broken down into two discussion forums, one for the planning component of this task and one for the skills-based component. In addition to the content analysis of the discussion forums, further evaluation of the unit was conducted

through standardised university student evaluations of the unit which provided qualitative information to determine students' perceptions of the experience. These were in the form of a computer questionnaire format ranking responses from 1-5 with one being very poor and five being very good with space provided for written responses. These questionnaires were administered by an independent person at the end of lectures in week nine of a thirteen week semester with a response rate of almost 70%.

RESULTS

One of the primary considerations when establishing an online discussion site is whether students will participate. The discussion forums under investigation, were not teacher-led but instead provided an opportunity for students to share their experiences, concerns and opinions. With each forum directly linked to an assessment piece, a total of 456 contributions were made on the planning forum and 211 contributions made on the skills-based forum in the full-time (day) semester comprising a class of 203 students. It is interesting to note, however, that while the part-time (night) semester was just under half the enrolment with 92 students, there were significantly less entries with 73 contributions overall on the planning forum and 71 contributions on the skills-based forum.

While the number of questions the part-time students asked was proportional to the number of questions asked in the full-time students' skills-based forum, the full-time students asked significantly more questions in the planning forum than any of the other forums. This could directly relate back to the students' lack of industry experience compared with the part-time students, many of whom already hold positions in the marketing communication sector. This is further reflected in the number of content questions asked in the full-time planning forum which accounted for 36% of contributions overall (and 80% of the types of questions) on this forum (see Table 1 for a breakdown of different types of contributions made on discussion forum overall according to Henri's (1992;1993) dimension measuring the level and types of participation). Similarly, the content questions asked on the part-time students' planning forum accounted for 56% of contributions overall (and 63% of the different types of questions) on this forum reflecting the higher level of difficulty this presented to the students.

TABLE ONE

Types of Participation	Plan – daytime class (203 students)	Portfolio – daytime class (203 students)	Plan – night class (92 students)	Portfolio – night class (92 students)
Administration Questions	10	16	7	10
Technical Questions	2	2	1	0
Social Contributions	26	16	6	6
Content Questions	166	65	26	21
Teacher's Responses (to students)	77	57	23	20
Students' Responses	175	55	10	14
Total Contributions	56	211	73	71

Breakdown of different types of contributions made on discussion forums according to Henri's (1992;1993) dimensions measuring the level and types of participation.

Another reason for the significantly reduced number of contributions overall in the part-time semester is the reduced number of responses made by the part-time students to other students. While the number of responses made overall on the full-time students' forums accounted for 38% (planning forum) and 26% (skills-based forum) of the overall number of contributions made, the responses on the part-time students' forums accounted for only 13% on the planning forum and 19% on the skills-based forum (see Table 2 for a breakdown of students' response types according to Henri's (1992;1993) four interactive dimensions). This potentially reflects the time part-time students had to participate in the forum.

TABLE TWO

Interactivity amongst students	Plan – daytime class (203 students)	Portfolio – daytime class (203 students)	Plan – night class (92 students)	Portfolio – night class (92 students)
Direct Responses (DR)	109	36	8	5
Direct Commentary (DC)	8	3	0	0
Indirect Responses (IR)	38	9	2	4
Indirect Commentary (IC)	10	2	0	0
Independent Statements (IS)	1	5	0	0

Breakdown of students' response types according to Henri's (1992;1993) four dimensions measuring

interactivity on planning and skills based discussion forums.

In terms of the cognitive level of collaboration on each of the discussion forums, most of the students' responses fell within Henri's (1992;1993) basic levels of elementary clarification (EC), indepth clarification (IC) or surface information processing (SIP) (see Table 3 for a breakdown of students' response types according to Henri's (1992;1993) cognitive and metacognitive dimensions). It should be noted that due to the low number of responses made by the part-time students (10 for the planning forum and 14 for the skills-based forum) that only the full-time forums have been evaluated on this level.

There is evidence, however, that in the full-time students' planning forum that deeper levels of information processing were occurring as they worked towards 'making sense' of the planning framework (see Table 3).

TABLE 3

Henri's (1992; 1993) Cognitive and Metacognitive Dimensions	Media Plan	Media Kit
COGNITIVE		
<i>Critical Thinking:</i>		
Elementary Clarification (EC)	51	8
Indepth Clarification (IC)	37	1
Inference (I)	0	1
Judgement (J)	0	4
Strategy (S)	1	2
<i>Information Processing:</i>		
Surface Information Processing (SIP)	34	27
Indepth Information Processing (IIP)	36	4
METACOGNITIVE		
<i>Knowledge:</i>		
Person	2	0
Task	0	2
Strategy	0	1
<i>Skills:</i>		
Evaluation	0	1
Planning	0	0
Regulation Self Awareness	5	2

Breakdown of full-time students' overall responses according to Henri's (1992;1993) cognitive and metacognitive dimensions.

From the qualitative data compiled in the Student Evaluation of the Unit (SEU), 88% of comments from students were positive about the online teaching and learning site with some of the aspects students liked about the forum itself reflected in the following comments:

- *I have found the forum incredibly helpful but I feel that if I had been in a group, we would*

have run out of ideas quickly or become stuck on a particular topic. This way, we can ask our general questions and receive answers from many different points of view. This has given my assignment a more creative edge and there are many different ideas and tactics in it. I love this forum!

- *I just want to express that the media room is a fantastic opportunity to obtain, share or query info. How many other subjects offer a safety net like this when at the last moment when you are not sure what to do, you can get online and do something about it instantly!*
- *The OLT discussion forum is helpful and the collaborative effort in it allows good clarification of the major project.*
- *The online forum is very beneficial and promotes group understanding.*
- *The discussion forum is also excellent as well letting students discuss among themselves. It's good that everyone can discuss their ideas and problems.*
- *The unit coordinator provided ongoing and excellent support to all students. I have never personally spoken to her, but know I could go to her if I had a problem.*

Of the feedback provided on the OLT site overall, 12% of comments were negative with these students highlighting the technical and organisational aspects that could be improved on. The other key concern in relation to the discussion forums related to other students answering questions. This required the unit coordinator assuring students that all responses were checked and added to if necessary.

DISCUSSION

While Henri's (1992; 1993) framework was useful in terms of determining levels of participation, it was limited in its application for this study potentially due to the fact that these forums were originally set up to serve a more administrative (Q&A) function rather than being formally designed to further the principles of collaborative learning. Despite their original intentions, however, the discussion forums did achieve so much more than a pure administrative function which brought classes of 100 and 200 students together on line as evidenced by the large number of student responses to other students' questions (particularly on the full-time forums). Without any analysis occurring at that point, the social dynamics amongst the group amongst the students, lecturer and client were very apparent. This came through both online and in the weekly lectures with much of the online activity of the past

week being a discussion point amongst students prior to the lecture, informing final content for the lecture itself, and forming the basis for face-to-face student-teacher interaction following the lecture.

The mutual support for client-based learning was also evident through the online communication with the principles of social cohesion, social constructivism, networked intelligence and the motivation and confidence (O'Reilly & Newton 2002) evident through the online discussions each week. A more formal analysis of the social contributions and dynamics of these forums would be useful to further provide evidence of collaboration in this class 'group'.

While the online forum also blurred the distinction between full-time and part-time enrolment modes by offering more flexibility to students, it did highlight the potential differences between these two cohorts of students especially in terms of the collaborative efforts made by full-time students compared with their part-time counterparts.

Probably the greatest representation or recognition of the collaborative effort was by the students themselves with the qualitative data from the Student Evaluations of the Unit (SEUs) providing some useful insights into the individual approach as opposed to a group approach and also the relationships (or perceived relationships) between the students themselves and the students and teachers. One of the main concerns for marketing educators in the teaching of large units is that of providing student feedback and ensuring students feel comfortable with, and have access to, teaching staff. Comments by students reflected this did occur with another study possible here to tie into the growing body of literature on what impacts on students' perceptions of teachers. Certainly, the online discussion forum enabled the unit coordinator to maintain control over a unit (with more than 200 students) in which the students would need a high level of support to guide them through what was potentially their first client-based project and their first marketing communication plan and written portfolio to ensure a high quality, student-centred learning experience.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This paper demonstrates that further experimentation with client-based projects based on the redefinition of a group or team approach to teaching and learning is important for marketing educators. Computer mediated communication (CMC) has enabled client-based projects to run on an individual basis in which whole classes of 20, 50, 100, 200 or more can come

together as 'the group' by adopting a collaborative learning approach. These findings lend themselves to a further study to test the level of collaborative learning by group size. That is, to see how much collaborative learning takes place in groups of 4 or 5 as distinct from groups of 10, or individual projects using an online discussion forum to drive the collaborative process. Such findings not only have implications for redefining 'the group' in client-based projects but could also help solve some of the challenges marketing educators have in terms of finding clients, the administration of a large number of groups (and clients) especially in large units, and grading students based on their individual performance and contribution within a groupwork setting.

Apart from the implications this study has for the redevelopment of client-based projects and the redefinition of 'the group' made possible by computer mediated communication (CMC), further investigation of how CMC can be used to evaluate marketing units for continuous improvement of these units through the use of online discussion transcripts. There is a wide range of literature already available beyond the scope of this paper on the further benefits and uses of evaluation of online transcripts. This body of literature also highlights one of the main challenges with ongoing evaluation of online discussion forums as being beyond the scope of academics in terms of the time involved. Significant resources have been invested for the development and support of online learning sites, however, we have probably been investing too little on the analysis of these sites to better improve unit development and teaching and learning practices. By establishing what has actually happened in the online environment within marketing units through the evaluation of online transcripts, marketing educators have the opportunity to inform what impact online technology could have in the future development of client-based projects and other teaching and learning approaches.

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