Chapter 16
Case Study:
Lecturer–Student Perspective of Virtual Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

A blended learning environment as utilised in a masters level subject was critiqued through the lenses afforded by Salmon and Goffman. The authors bring perspectives of student and teacher and combine personal recollection with discussion board postings to make sense of the experience and recommendations for teaching in a blended environment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the use of teaching and learning activities delivered via the virtual learning environment (VLE) used together with face-to-face interaction in the classroom, self directed study and individual tutorial support within a blended teaching and learning strategy. The chapter is based on the actual experiences of the module leader and students attending a masters level research methods module offered at University Campus Suffolk. The chapter comments on the nature of interaction between student and teacher, and student and student, in how they present themselves as professionals from a diverse

range of health care backgrounds, and how they manage that interaction. For example, how do the students manage and present their 'virtual' professional identity in respect to their 'face-to-face' one, and in what way does this inform the dynamic in both the virtual and face-to-face encounters and discussions.

The chapter presents this commentary as a dialogue between the student, Sam Chenery-Morris (SCM), and the teacher, Catherine Theodosius (CT), an adult branch nurse lecturer. The dialogue also draws on threads posted on the VLE by other students during the module, and their comments made in the module evaluation (face-to-face). SCM represents the student's collective perspective during the dialogue; however, the reflection that follows is her own. How the

nature of both virtual and face-to-face interaction impacts on identity, reflects different professional perspectives and shapes the learning experience is discussed by drawing on the work of Goffman (1959, 1967), such as 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' and 'Interaction Ritual' and Salmon's 5 stage model of e-learning (Salmon 2000).

BACKGROUND

University Campus Suffolk, the United Kingdom's newest university (founded 2007) moved into a brand new state-of-the-art building in September 2008 as the students arrived to begin their courses/modules. Online registration and module enrolment was introduced for all programmes. The research methods module runs in the first semester of the second year of study for all students taking part-time health care masters (M level) courses. Although the students had already completed the first year, therefore, the introduction of the VLE was new, with online registration being their initial exposure. Thus, when they arrived for the first day of the module, they had already formed an impression of the use of the VLE and their ability to navigate around it. The VLE used at UCS is Blackboard (but known as Wolsey), an asynchronous package through which all administration and virtual student teacher interaction is delivered. This includes virtual areas for each module inclusive of discussion forums and areas to post important information, student activities, links, reading and teaching resources, such as power point presentations of face-to-face lectures. The fifteen students taking this module are all highly experienced, registered practitioners, released from their practice on a part-time basis to advance their continuing professional development. They are, therefore, individuals with a highly developed sense of professional identity and experience in its performance within the workplace.

The importance of understanding how we present ourselves to others, and how this informs our sense of self; what we perceive is expected of us, and what we expect of others, was first comprehensively studied by Goffman. Goffman's (1959, 1967) theories of the presentation of self and everyday interaction are used because they help to unpack and understand some of the underlying dynamics taking place in both the VLE and face-to-face interaction between the students and the teacher. The stress and fear of too close a scrutiny when something new is presented to us, and we feel our performance is under observation whilst we adjust to it, can be immense. This can impact on how we perceive ourselves and others, and how we believe they perceive us (Höpfl & Linstead 1993). This is especially the case when one's performance on the back stage is perceived to be as visible as the front stage (Goffman 1959). Traditionally, performance in the classroom in front of peers and the teacher is expected and there are well developed norms, values and rules of interaction to mediate it. Students can collectively expect to be challenged by the introduction of a new subject area that they are unfamiliar with, and can share such anxieties. The ability to learn and produce acceptable results as a consequence of that learning, however, is often hidden from peers and is a matter between them and their teacher. Asking students to post their work on the VLE where others can also view it, confuses what is considered to be front and back stage performance for the student, and therefore can generate significant anxiety impacting on their self perception. It is also more difficult for the students to judge their performance and identify their place within the peer group, and could potentially impact on subsequent face-to-face dynamics in the classroom. Equally, the student's professional identities are more evident in the front stage classroom discussions but hidden or masked on the VLE (back stage). This is partly due to ease of performance on the front stage and partly because it is easier to attach a profession to the image of somebody

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