

## Chapter II

# Including Online Discussions Within Campus-Based Students' Learning Environments

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### ABSTRACT

*Online discussions are now available as a pedagogical option in blended learning environments in universities. Much of the research to date has focused on the characteristics of this computer-mediated environment and its potential for learning and there has been less examination of wider contextual factors. This chapter presents case study research which investigates online discussions as they occur within the broader framework of the learning design or curriculum within a blended environment in a campus-based degree programme. The chapter provides insights into influential factors for undergraduate student learning and makes recommendations for teachers who wish to advance the educational potential of the new communication medium.*

### INTRODUCTION

When students arrive at universities to attend campus based programmes, they have expectations about their learning experiences. While they may have looked at the university website for information about their courses and enrolled online, they often do not seem to be ready for a learning environment where various kinds of ICT

are blended with traditional face-to-face activities such as lectures, tutorials, and small group learning. This may be for various reasons. Mature students may lack confidence to go into the new virtual spaces which demand technical skills and the ability to create an online presence or identity. Younger students, particularly those that have grown up in technology rich environments, may consider that virtual environments are for social

networking and not for learning and, paradoxically, expect that all forms of learning with others will occur on the physical campus.

Many campus-based universities have introduced asynchronous online discussions in their learning environments. This technology, as a new learning domain, offers a different interaction medium from that of face-to-face discussions; for example, text-based rather than spoken exchanges, time to read and think about messages, and compose a response, and space for everyone to make a contribution, at the same or different times and from different places (Harasim, 2000). These characteristics indicate the potential that online discussions have to complement, enhance and extend the traditional types of learning that have occurred in campus-based environments.

However, the use of online discussions in undergraduate settings has met with varying success and their pedagogical benefits are yet to be clearly established (Laurillard, 2002). While a body of research is now available about online discussions, less is known about their role in campus-based environments and their interaction with other aspects of that environment, especially the learning design or curriculum. In order to develop good practice, more knowledge is needed about online discussions, and the way in which they may support learning in blended environments. If universities wish to create student-centred learning environments, then more insight is also needed about student perspectives of online discussions when they are part of campus-based study and the ways in which they help or hinder their learning.

Online discussions present a new learning space for students and the characteristics of this space (for example, text based, interactive) suggest that learning in this setting is different from face-to-face learning. The study discussed in this chapter was designed to investigate what this new reality entailed for students, to develop descriptions of their learning from their perspective and examine the interdependencies between the

online and face-to-face environments. The study was interpretive and described student perspectives of the influence of the computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) environment and broader environmental factors, such as the curriculum design on their learning. The research project comprised four case studies and a cross-case analysis. This chapter presents the results of a comparative analysis of the four case studies and discusses the overall findings with particular reference to one of the cases (named throughout the chapter as the Debate case).

## **BACKGROUND**

Blended learning practice in campus-based education is marked by enormous diversity, and this is also reflected in the literature. The introductory chapter to this book acknowledges the wide variety of definitions and frameworks, however most writers have referred to a mixture of face-to-face and ICT based environments. Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) emphasized the role of ICT in their concept of '*blended e-learning*' which prompts readers to consider the ideas of e-learning and also its introduction into campus settings as two separate concepts. The increase in the use of the term blended learning has been accompanied by a commensurate decrease in references to the term '*flexible learning*.' Graham (2006) identified access and flexibility as one of the major reasons for blended learning but did not explore the connection to flexible learning in any depth. The dominance now of the new idea of '*blends*' rather than flexibility within universities, raising questions concerning the philosophical and pedagogical differences between them and their impact on learning.

## **The Learning Context**

The literature indicates that blended learning essentially offers a contextual approach to learn-

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