

Case Studies

Case Study 2: Student authoring in LAMS and assessment of chat sessions

A discussion with Leanne Cameron and Nick Hutchinson, School of Education, ACES, Macquarie University

We have seen a growing number of staff willing to try LAMS as a small part of their curriculum. But few have yet taken the plunge and fully integrated LAMS as a core technology. Leanne Cameron and Nick Hutchinson from the School of Education at Macquarie, using a design originally conceived by Dr Donna Gibbs¹, have now used LAMS intensively in their ICT course for pre-service teachers. Their second year students have not only been learners in LAMS, but have authored sequences themselves. Students experience the learner and author/teacher perspective in LAMS, making judgments about the design of online or blended learning environments and devising strategies for implementation which they might use in a future classroom of their own. The positive results of their initiative have encouraged education staff to repeat the experience in 2006, having learnt quite a number of lessons on the way!

Students come to the education units with varying degrees of information and communication literacy, and varied attitudes to the technology. Because they are pre-service teachers does not mean that the students either like or know about educational technology. This all adds to the challenge for Leanne and Nick, particularly in Information and Communication Technologies and Education (EDUC261). In this unit students were introduced to LAMS as one of the many technologies teachers might use in and out of the classroom. However, LAMS was also used for course delivery, to assist students' discussion and reflection on the theory underpinning technology usage, to support investigation of other technologies, and to aid collaboration in small groups. Usage of LAMS was embedded in the assessment regime: three chat sessions of the prescribed readings accounted for 20% of the total marks (and will be lifted to 25% in 2006); authoring of a LAMS sequence was compulsory, but marked only as pass or fail, with an accompanying analysis and reflection of the pedagogical design worth 35%.

Teaching strategy for chat sessions

The strategy used by Leanne and Nick to improve discussion of the prescribed readings is of particular interest. Staff were not convinced that students ever made the best use of the prescribed readings in this course, so they designed a series of LAMS chat sessions to address the problem. Students were given three opportunities to use chat, two during class and one outside of class time. Only the latter two discussions were included in the assessment mark. It is unusual to assess chat sessions as they are often more suited to short exchanges and usually contain much irrelevant material ('chatty' conversation). However the 'chatting process' can be an important part of the journey into real reflection

¹ Associate Professor, Dr Donna Gibbs, from the School of Education at Macquarie, has been a key academic in the initial development of LAMS and its early trials.

on practical and theoretical issues, and if students are given space to throw ideas around and experiment with concepts they can often come up with powerful insights. These discussions may also take on a lighter vein including humour. This in turn can promote creativity and new perspectives, and perhaps unexpected outcomes.

In the first chat session students in groups of six practised exchanging ideas about the readings based on a set question. They were able to do this in an informal and social way during class time. They shared ideas about the literature, assessed LAMS for its possibilities and limitations in the educational context, and reflected on the marking criteria to be used for the chat sessions. This was a compulsory activity, but worth 0%. Nick commented that students were finding their way in this preparatory session and outcomes were mixed for both staff and students.

For the second chat session a few weeks later, groups were reduced to a more manageable four students, and a new set of readings was discussed. Each student was assessed for 10% of total marks and students completed this activity as an 'asynchronous chat' outside of class. While 'asynchronous chat' seems to be an oxymoron, students were consulted on the technology to be used for the discussion, and voted for the chat tool. Students familiarity with the tool perhaps accounts for their choice second time round. Also a record of chat sessions is preserved for the learner in LAMS - which is not the case for most other available chat tools. Nick commented that students were more confident in this second session and had easy access to their readings at home while they chatted. This chat was marked online by the teaching staff. The quality of the interactions was assessed as being of a high standard.

The third and final chat was again 10%, with four students per group, in class time, without access to the readings, and students were expected to discuss and integrate their comments, not just paste statements about the theory into the chat tool. Leanne and Nick both commented that one of the best results of this final discussion was that they had readily accessible evidence of students' understanding of the prescribed readings. Additionally, as with many online activities, this type of discussion gave some of the quieter students more space to demonstrate their interpretation of the literature.

Student entries in the last chat were often quite large paragraphs – very different to the more rapid, staccato exchanges usually associated with chat. Some would think that an asynchronous forum (rather than a chat) would have been a more suitable format for this assessment, but chat did allow for a greater liveliness, and students still managed to contribute considered reflections to the discussion. It was an interesting blend of synchronous and asynchronous discussion. Leanne noted that assessing discussions has rarely worked in face-to-face situations. The examination that later followed these online discussions also indicated that students had engaged more with the readings and lecture content overall, and both staff members pointed to the assessable discussions as important activities in that process of information integration.

In terms of lessons learned, Leanne and Nick noticed that Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students were less likely to do well in the chatting tasks than a formal essay, and next time they would look at ways to scaffold these particular students more through the exercise. In marking the discussions, the lecturers also noted that some

students brought along prepared answers on disc to paste into the chat. These students were not always advantaged by this as they did not necessarily integrate the prepared answer into the on-going discussion. To reduce marking time in the future, but preserve the quality of the discussions, students will be asked to select a number of entries from the chat sessions and give their reflections on these plus justifications for why these selections are of relevance, given pre-determined criteria.

Student authoring

There were many issues that came out of the student authoring experience that Nick and Leanne will discuss in an academic paper in the future. Undoubtedly students were given a sound basis for developing their own online methodologies, and students' level of teaching experience was evident in the kind of activities they designed. In reflecting on some of the methodology classes (History, English, Human Society and the Environment, Languages, Computing and Science) Leanne commented on the importance of saving work constantly when authoring in LAMS. One group in particular did not realise that they needed to not only click 'OK' as they added content and instructions to the LAMS tools, but they also needed to click the 'SAVE' button on the top menu so that the whole sequence was saved onto the server at regular intervals. There were some disappointed students when they realised that over an hour's work had been lost. This is one of the cruel lessons of technology - but better learnt as a student rather than in the rush of the school day as a 'real' teacher!

Some of the student sequences from EDUC261 have been added to the [LAMS Community](#) website in the K-12 section and are well worth looking at. They include sequences on Ancient History (the Peloponnesian wars), Economics and personal finance, Geography and conservation, King Lear and one of the novels set for the English curriculum, the Australian gold rushes, Year 7 Science and the planets, the digestive system, personal independence and technology.

Cameron and Hutchinson are preparing a paper on more of the issues arising from their use of LAMS in the School of Education. Subscribers to the LAMS Community will be notified when this is available.

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