## ARTICLE

# *Talking Point* – Flexible Targeted Online Staff Development that Works

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The UK Open University has a large, highly distributed workforce, particularly within its part-time teaching staff who work mainly from home and who live across the UK and Ireland. In these circumstances it is a challenge to provide professional development which allows for situated learning, peer interaction and community building. In this paper we describe a case study of an online initiative which allows distance staff easily to participate in one-day professional development events focussing on specific topics of relevance to particular groups. Event design incorporates a combination of near-synchronous sessions, synchronous sessions and web-based content. The short duration of the event enhances a sense of presence and can help to create an intense and stimulating development experience. A particular advantage of the design is in providing space which can be used to encourage informal situated learning, peer interaction and community building. The format also can easily bring together a diverse range of colleagues across geographic or subject boundaries. We describe and evaluate three different types of event which have run in this space, showing that the online format encouraged attendance, and the design afforded opportunities for peer engagement, reflection and social learning. The main drawback was the large message base in the event forum, which we mitigated by providing summaries of the discussion topics.

## Introduction

### The Open University context

The UK Open University (OU) is the largest university in the UK and is a world leader in flexible distance learning, with just under 200,000 part-time students. Around 10,000 staff, including about 5,000 part-time tutors, work from home or from one of 13 centres around the UK (3 national centres, 9 English regional centres, and the main centre at Milton Keynes). Our part-time tutoring staff, Associate Lecturers (ALs), who work mainly from home and often fit in their OU work around other jobs and busy lives, are distributed across the whole of the UK and the Republic of Ireland: these staff rarely have the opportunity to meet colleagues face to face.

In most Higher Education (HE) institutions, formal professional development tends to take place at face to face workshops, often with separate online resources available for suggesting new ideas and consolidating practices. However, we know that much professional development takes place informally, 'on the job', through personal experience as staff try out new approaches, or though planned or chance meetings and discussions with colleagues. Informal learning opportunities embedded like this in everyday work activities contribute to situated learning, peer interaction and community building (Clus, 2011; Eraut, 2004; Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006).

Part-time tutoring staff who work at a distance, as in the OU, often miss out both on face to face workshops, because they have to travel to such events, and also on the informal learning that takes place for staff in a workplace during a normal working day. In addition, like many teaching staff in HE institutions, part-time tutors are likely to be time-poor and willing only to focus on professional development which is directly relevant to their own working practices (Ottenbreit-Leftwich et al., 2010). Distance staff, like other staff, need opportunities to attend staff development workshops, and they need spaces to interact with each other, build networks, share ideas and reflect on their practice. These issues present huge challenges for professional developers, not only to create cost effective, relevant, timely and engaging events which staff are able to and want to attend, but to try to recreate at least some of the situated learning, peer interaction and community building that can occur naturally and almost without awareness in the workplace (Milligan et al., 2014).

These issues (distance staff, part-time time-poor tutors needing access to informal learning, situated learning,

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peer interaction, networking and community building) are of relevance not just to distance institutions like the OU, but also to dual mode institutions, as increasing numbers of part-time staff are engaged in teaching and tutoring duties, and rarely visit their home institution, or do so at times when other staff are not working.

In this paper we describe and evaluate the design of an online initiative developed to address these issues, the one day online event.

### Designing online professional development

In The Open University we have developed a number of initiatives to meet the challenges of designing professional development for distance staff, including designing exemplars and modules for online tuition which run entirely online. Some of these 'at scale' developments have been well documented (Macdonald and Campbell, 2010; 2012). Such developments provide flexibility in participation whilst catering to geographic separation. Our work has demonstrated that professional development in the online environment can be very successful when the opportunity to reflect together with a community of peers is included, so that it can play a central role in building confidence and inspiring new ideas for practice (Campbell and Macdonald, 2011).

### The Talking Point Initiative

One of our initiatives, *Talking point*, provides the opportunity for single one-day online events, focussing on specific topics of relevance to particular groups of staff. The theme of the event can be anything of relevance to staff. Topics have included subjects as diverse as correspondence tuition, graduateness (Campbell and Edwards, 2012) and employability as well as several events on the topic of online synchronous tuition. The site can also be used to run a series of identical events in order to meet immediate institutional staff development needs for large cohorts of staff. We discuss some examples below.

### The Talking point design

Live *Talking point* events incorporate a mixture of web-based content, synchronous sessions and near-synchronous sessions (see **Figure 1**). The flexible design provides space for presentational or workshop style sessions, and a space for staff to meet informally, to chat, share practice and reflect. The event can be designed to mirror to some extent what would happen in a face to face conference. Our aim for these events is not only to allow knowledge building, discussion and reflection on the topic at hand but also to help build or maintain a sense of community and belonging amongst distance staff, perhaps across discipline areas, depending on the event, and across geographic space. Although the particular event is short-term, taking place over only one day, it can contribute to community-building, by allowing staff to develop personal ties with each other, as well as to reinforce a shared sense of purpose and belief in their work (Baran and Correia, 2014; Kear, 2011; Perry and Edwards, 2010).

· **Near-synchronous sessions**
These are held in a moderated online forum on the day of the event: interactions between participants can feel almost synchronous within fast-running discussions. Asynchronous discussions in online forums can sometimes lack immediacy and may not always get good engagement, especially when extended over long time periods (Kear, 2011). However here the time-limited nature of the forum can encourage engagement and participation (Campbell and Macdonald, 2011) and has been shown to be an effective method of encouraging interaction and collaboration
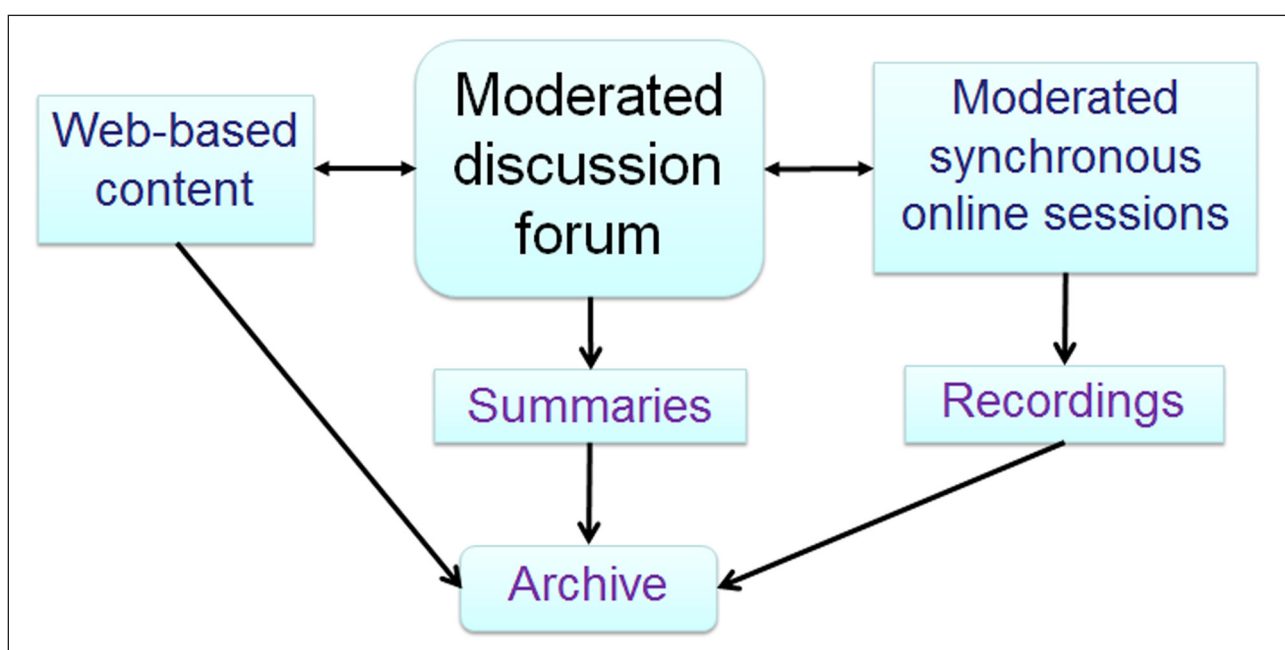


**Figure 1:** The *Talking point* design, showing the central role of the forum.

amongst participants (Blake and Scanlon, 2013). The forum is central to a *Talking point* event as the near-synchronous discussions form the key interactions between staff.

· **Synchronous sessions**
Live sessions are presently held in a bespoke version of the online conferencing software, Blackboard Collaborate (we formerly used its predecessor, Elluminate), an interactive and social medium suitable for short, live presentations or workshops. The synchronous online environment can be tiring to use or participate in for long periods of time, but over shorter periods it allows live presentations or workshops to be run successfully.

· **Web-based content**
This may comprise material within a selection of different media, but usually it comprises a simple textual briefing on the topic at hand. This content is made available in advance of the event so that participants can familiarise themselves with the subject matter before attending, if they wish.

· **Accessible archive**
For those who are unable to participate on the day of the event, or who wish to revisit any of the material, recordings of live sessions and summaries of forum discussions are posted in an Archive area, and are open to all staff in the institution.

Events are designed to operate within a community of enquiry framework (Garrison and Anderson, 2003): with social presence being created mainly within the forum as participants chat to each other informally, but also perhaps orally in live online workshops or in live chat during presentation sessions; teaching presence being created by the design of staff development materials within each specific event, including web-based content, workshop or presentation content and forum starter messages; and cognitive presence being created jointly by presenters, moderators and participants as they share knowledge and practice.

Gilly Salmon's 5-stage model is also relevant here, as we will show in the following discussions, with participants working at stages 2 to 4 of her model – Online socialisation, Information exchange and Knowledge construction (Salmon, 2002).

## Three Different Talking Point Events
Here we describe three different types of event which have run in the *Talking point* space. For each event, there was considerable planning and preparation which started some months in advance of the event.

### 1. Large scale event
In early 2013, we held a one-day Saturday event for Science faculty staff, aimed at ALs, their line-managers, and other faculty members. Within the OU, there is presently an institutional drive to making use of online synchronous tuition to replace or augment face to face tuition. The Faculty of Science has been in the vanguard of this drive to a new way of working, and this event was created to meet a particular area of development need within the faculty, the pedagogy of online synchronous facilitation.

A one day online conference was designed with live presentations and day-long forum discussions. This single event was complex and time-consuming to develop, because of the range of staff we wanted to attract and because we took considerable time in developing themes and content that were certain to be relevant to ALs. For this event, a small community of practice was created within a dedicated online forum, where event staff, presenters and moderators discussed and developed both the live presentations and the starter forum messages: the presentations produced addressed key themes, encouraged discussion and reflection, and did not overlap (Campbell and Jones, 2014). Several presenters and moderators of the forum and live text chat were AL staff who had a particular insight into the challenges and issues facing part-time distance science tutoring staff. A similar model of a collaborative team approach by distance tutors was previously used successfully in a different project to create an online staff development resource (Macdonald & Campbell, 2012).

Alongside a web-based briefing document pointing to relevant literature, two synchronous sessions took place, morning and afternoon, each roughly one hour long, each comprising four 15 minute short presentations (including questions and answers). The live sessions included live moderated chat, which took place concurrently with the presentations. Presentation times were adhered to strictly, something that was appreciated by several participants. This was made easier by the use of a timer function within the software. The associated forum was seeded throughout the day with starter messages related to the presentations and to key issues for staff (see **Figure 2**). Presenters participated throughout the day with individual forum threads related to their presentations. This event attracted 145 participants, mainly AL staff, with around 130 staff joining the morning's synchronous session.

### 2. Small scale event
A much smaller scale event, held on a Saturday in April 2013, was focussed on student employability. This event was designed to open space for ALs with an interest in the area to learn more about student employability, to share insights into student needs, and to consider how they can help enhance student employability through teaching practices. The session introduced the OU student employability policy and the resources and activities of the OU Careers Advisory Service which are in place to support this.

A set of interlinked web pages formed a comprehensive briefing document, available to participants in advance of the event. A one hour-long live synchronous session took place on the morning of the event, in seminar style, comprising two live presentations of around half an hour each (including questions and answers) from members of the OU Student Employability and Careers project team. These presentations focussed on introducing the OU student

**Forum discussion topics**

There were 6 main discussion topics in the forum, as well as topics called "Quick questions on xxx's presentation" to support each live presentation

**Main Forum Discussion topics.**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Student perspective* | What do you think Elluminate is like from a student perspective? How would prior experience, no experience and their own pre-conceptions affect the student? |
| *Engaging students* | How do we engage and motivate students using Elluminate tutorials? Is the type of session important? Does the subject matter make a difference? |
| *AL continuing professional development* | What would be useful for AL's continuing professional development in using Online rooms to promote student learning? Should this be provided by faculty, university, or by peers |
| *Recording tutorials* | What are the advantages and disadvantages for students/tutors/the university of recording Elluminate tutorials for different types of tutorials |
| Thinking about strategy and policy | Should faculty have a strategy on the use of online rooms? Should module teams have free reign on how online rooms are used? Should ALs be involved in planning/designing tutorials? |
| *Your suggestions* | Have you any other thoughts or suggestions on how we can enhance AL and student experience in using Elluminate? |

**Figure 2:** Screenshot of part of the archived briefing document for the Sciences Online Rooms event, showing the main forum discussion topics.

employability policy and the resources and activities of the OU Careers Advisory Service. As before, a moderated live chat ran alongside the live presentations. Moderated forum discussions were open throughout the day, but the bulk of the forum activity took place between 9am and 1:30pm, with participant traffic centred around the live session. The forum discussions shared insights into student needs and considered how ALs can help enhance student employability through their teaching practices. The event attracted 21 participants on the day plus presenting and moderating staff.

### 3. Series of training sessions
The OU recently made a fairly rapid change to using Blackboard Collaborate for online tutorials and conferencing, having previously used the predecessor, Elluminate. This meant that urgent and timely training in using the system for large numbers of part-time teaching and other staff from across the university was necessary. We put the *Talking point* site to use for this at fairly short notice, running a series of one-day 'Transition' events on Saturdays to train ALs and other staff to use the new system (see **Figure 3**). Each event's training consisted of:

· Two repeated live demonstrations on the day of each event within the new synchronous online system ('Basics' and 'Learning more').
· Practice areas with preloaded instructions for specific features, which were open at all times (not just on the day of the event).
· Drop-in moderated sessions on the day of each event for problem-solving tricky features.
· A moderated forum discussion on the day of each event.
· A frequently asked questions (FAQ) wiki, open at all times.
· A resources area which included slides from the live demonstrations, information on advanced features, and links to further material and guides, open at all times.
· A fun quiz, open at all times.
· The synchronous demonstrations were available as pre-recordings for staff who missed one or more of the live sessions and were available at all times.
· Forum discussions were archived into an open forum after each event. However, the huge numbers of discussion topics meant that information could easily be lost. To counteract this, we added relevant

**1 Click below for a timetable and information**

What is OU Live? Why can't we just keep Elluminate? Is this event for me? What is the timetable? Where can I learn more?

Find out by clicking on the link below.

⤵ More information on the OU Live transition events

**2 Register here for an OU Live Saturday transition event**

Click on the Bookings wiki and then on the date of your choice to register for one of the transition events.

Ⓦ OU Live events Bookings wiki

If you cannot attend on a Saturday, see the section below 'If you cannot attend a Saturday event'.

All the material and rooms on this site can be used at any time for self-study.

**3 Join the forum discussions with your colleagues**

Join in the forum discussions from 9 am on the day of an event.

Meet and chat to your colleagues before coming to the live demonstrations.

💬 OU Live event discussion forum

**4 Participate in the live demonstrations**

On the day of the event:

- Live demonstrations at 10 am (Basics) and 11 am (Learning more).
- Repeated at 2pm (Basics) and 3 pm (Learning More).
- View a pre-recorded session if you've missed one.
- Drop-in sessions at 1pm and 4 pm.

👥 OU Live Demonstration Room

**5 After the live demonstrations**

Try out all the tools and any new ideas in the OU Live practice rooms
If you want to meet up with someone to practice on the day of the event, put a message into the Practice thread in the discussion forum.

☰ OU Live practice rooms

**Figure 3:** Screenshot of part of the Transition event home page. Note that 'OU Live' is the OU's bespoke version of Blackboard Collaborate.

questions and answers from the forum discussions, and from the live sessions, to the FAQ wiki, so that discussions, questions and solutions were not lost and were searchable.

On the day of each Transition event a central role was taken by the live sessions, including drop-in sessions: in this event the medium was the message, as staff got to grips with learning how to use the new software tool. However the discussion forum was also central, as a valuable area for reflection and for discussion. Participants sometimes extended the discussions to include consideration of the best way to use the tool for learning and teaching, as well as hints and tips on how to use features of the software.

These events ran from late May 2013 until March 2014. In total, around 700 staff attended one of 13 live events, and around 400 staff viewed the recorded demonstrations. An additional 2500 or so staff (unique visitors) visited the site over that period to view or to use the transitioning material, including the practice areas, the wiki and the resources area. Note that in addition to this dedicated transition training, around 300 staff attended introductory OU Live staff development in our flagship staff development module, 'Tutor Moderators', over that period (Campbell & Macdonald, 2011), and additional 200 or so attended evening demonstrations of the new software. As not all AL staff use tutor online as yet, the combined total of around 3500 (out of 5000 ALs) is likely to represent the number of staff who needed training over that period.

**Participant Perceptions of the Events**
In each of the events described we asked participants to fill out a post-event questionnaire in which they reflected on the event. The questionnaires addressed the first two levels, 'Reaction' and 'Learning', in Kirkpatrick's Four Level Evaluation Model (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), going beyond the 'smile sheet' exit survey often found at face to face events, as the questions allowed

open-ended free text answers. In addition to some questions which addressed perceptions of the topic at hand, each questionnaire asked about the good features of the design, what could be done better, and asked for other comments.

There was a good response to the post-event questionnaires from participants in each of the events: 60 out of the 145 attendees of the Science online rooms event; 17 of the 21 attendees at the Employability event; and 350 of the 700 staff who attended a Transition event. Some common cross-cutting themes emerged, despite the topic of each event being different.

### A sense of community

Many staff pointed out that connecting with colleagues and feeling part of a community was very valuable, something which was obvious from both the forum discussion and the live text chat, where there were messages catching up with colleagues alongside serious discussions and light-hearted banter.[1]

> More events like this please, it's easy to feel isolated as ALs especially with technology so this was great. (S3)

> . . . loved feeling part of a live community – interacting and contributing and learning. . . (S11)

> I was pleasantly surprised by how 'intimate' it seemed (S50)

> The experience of connecting with colleagues from all over the university is always enjoyable on these occasions. . . I thought it was a very good use of technology to bring such diverse (both geographical and subject expertise) people together. (E6)

> (It was good). . . hearing from OU staff that I wouldn't ordinarily ever get to meet with. (14E)

> (It was good). . . meeting other colleagues who are struggling just as much as you are, sometimes more than you are which makes you feel very good. :) (T71)

> . . . great interactivity from the group taking part in the training (T179)

This online networking and community building (Stage 2 of Gilly Salmon's 5-stage framework) was a key aspect of every event, and encouraged strong engagement and social learning through peer interaction and reflection in the later stages of the framework (Salmon, 2002).

### Peer reflection and learning

Staff valued being able to share practice with each other, and this was evident in the forum discussions, as well as in the live text of the synchronous sessions (see **Figures 4** & **5**). Discussions often started with information exchange (Stage 3 in Salmon's 5- stage framework) and moved to knowledge construction through thoughtful and reflective interaction (Stage 4 in Salmon's 5-stage framework) (Salmon, 2002).

In the Science online rooms event, spontaneous forum discussions included how to foster student-student interaction, planning and design of tutorials, making tutorials interactive, handling different sizes of group, designing for students with special needs and many other discussions.

Staff participating in the Employability event also discussed a range of related topics in the forum including the diversity of the student body, the reduction of practical work in the curriculum, how to help students with transferable skills including IT skills, self-awareness, networking and other topics.

The Transition training event forum discussions included many technical topics of the 'how do I. . . ?' sort, but also included debates and discussions on good practice between many ALs (**Figure 6**).

Many staff pointed out how valuable this situated learning and peer interaction was to them:

> As a non-expert I picked up a lot of good pointers from experienced practitioners both in the asynchronous and synchronous sessions – this was the most valuable aspect of attending for me. (S50)

> Have got 10 new ideas for improving my sessions! Hurrah! (S61, from live text chat)

> I picked up a couple of very good tips, and I am really glad that I was able to take part. (T18)

> Generally very informative and stimulating discussions in the forum. Lot of policies going on that I was previously unaware of. (E10)

> (It was good). . . discussing the AL role in terms of student employability (E14)

A combination of the short duration of the events, presentations or demonstrations which were relevant and which also raised issues for discussion, and appropriately openly worded starter messages in the discussion forums contributed to an online atmosphere which allowed this social learning to take place.

### Moderation

Key to the success of all these events was the professional and skilled moderation of both forum and live sessions by staff knowledgeable in the topic, who were peers of most of those attending.

> ): I am impressed with the moderators . . . there is a lot of traffic going through! (S62, from live text chat)

> Excellent Elluminate moderation. Excellent Forum moderation (E7)

> It was great to have experienced facilitators who could offer relevant information (T156)

Definitely a good point,

In the current presentation of S104 I have several dyslexic students and am trying to brainstorm good methods for improving my Elluminate sessions for them. I did some reading earlier that suggested the use of certain fonts made it easier for dyslexics to not have the characters 'flip over', but I now can't remember which fonts. At any rate, I gently asked the students in question in email what I could do to help, and one said that as long as I avoided fonts like Times New Roman (so I assume serif fonts in general), she would probably be OK.

Reply   Edit   Delete   Split   Permalink                    Jump to:  ↑ Parent
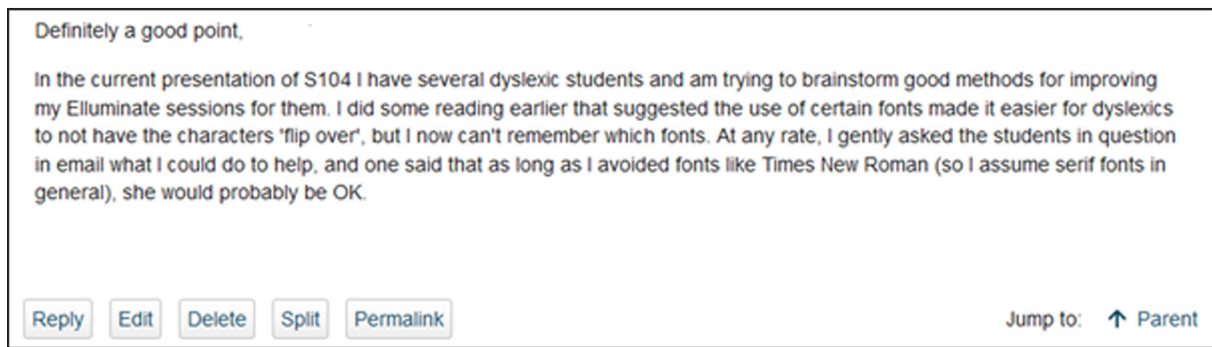
**Figure 4:** Screenshot of part of a forum thread looking at student perceptions of using synchronous online rooms. (From the Sciences Online Rooms event.)
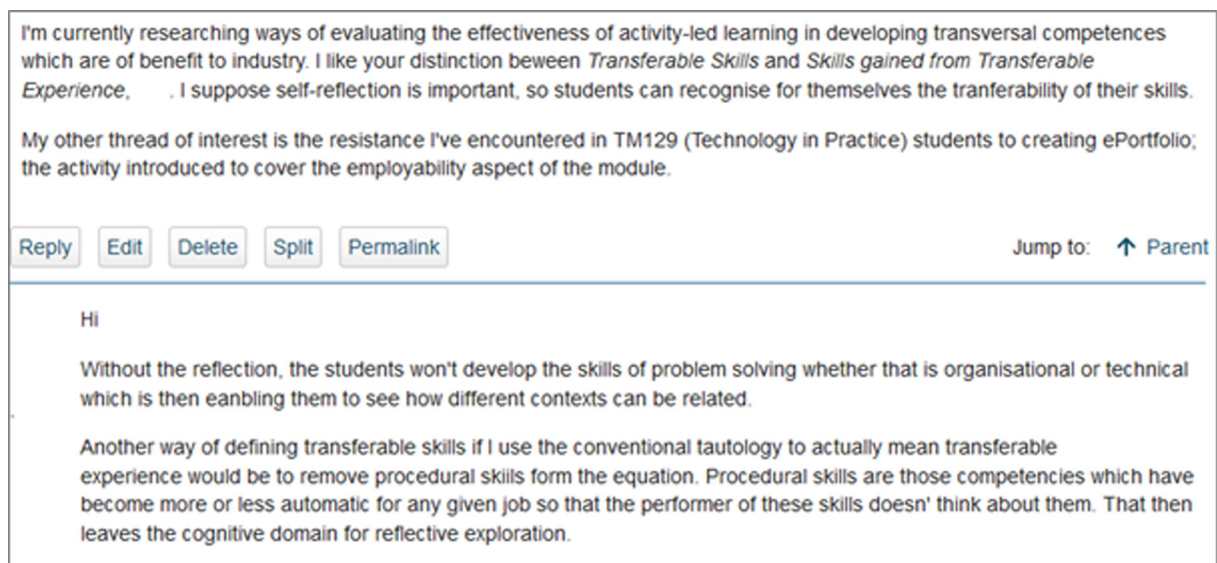
I'm currently researching ways of evaluating the effectiveness of activity-led learning in developing transversal competences which are of benefit to industry. I like your distinction beween *Transferable Skills* and *Skills gained from Transferable Experience*,    . I suppose self-reflection is important, so students can recognise for themselves the tranferability of their skills.

My other thread of interest is the resistance I've encountered in TM129 (Technology in Practice) students to creating ePortfolio; the activity introduced to cover the employability aspect of the module.

Reply   Edit   Delete   Split   Permalink                    Jump to:  ↑ Parent

Hi

Without the reflection, the students won't develop the skills of problem solving whether that is organisational or technical which is then eanbling them to see how different contexts can be related.

Another way of defining transferable skills if I use the conventional tautology to actually mean transferable experience would be to remove procedural skiils form the equation. Procedural skills are those competencies which have become more or less automatic for any given job so that the performer of these skills doesn' think about them. That then leaves the cognitive domain for reflective exploration.

**Figure 5:** Screenshot of part of a thread discussing transferable skills, experience and learning. (From the Employability event.)

There are easier ways of doing or customising pretty much everything, and video is much better integrated (though that's going to feel like worrying news for my more socially anxious students - I get a lot of mental health ARs in the courses I teach). Sounds like people will be trying to access it with mobile devices which are (maybe deliberately??) very restricted in functionality - maybe that's good as we can discourage students from taking a casual approach to where/how they attend, so that they do really focus?

I got the impression that people in the sessions this morning varied in their technical + Elluminate experience? If tutors vary a lot in how quickly they can suss it all out, then just imagine the range for our students who are sometimes really lost just with forums etc. Looking forward to spending a whole first tutorial 'hand-holding', while trying to slip in a bit of course content...
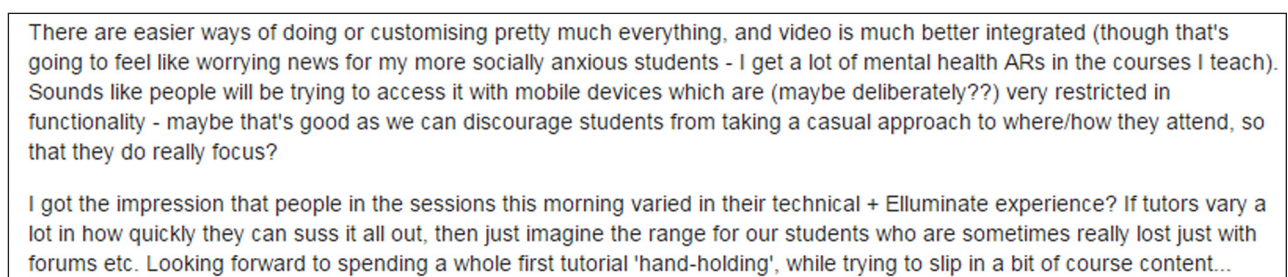
**Figure 6:** Screenshot of part of a discussion discussing how to help and encourage students to participate in an online synchronous tutorial. (From one of the Transition events.)

For each of the events, moderators contributed to the planning and development process, in particular deciding how to phrase starter messages for the forum which would encourage engagement and reflections from staff on the themes of the event, as well as allowing for networking and community building. During the events they summarised textual discussions from the live events, bringing these summaries into the forum, and vice-versa. They also answered queries or used weaving and summarising to draw out themes within forum or live chat discussions (**Figure 7**).

### Message base
The very strong attendance and engagement in both the discussion forums and in the live sessions did have a significant drawback. In the forum there tended to be many threads and a large message base, even in the smaller Employability event, which some participants found could be overwhelming.
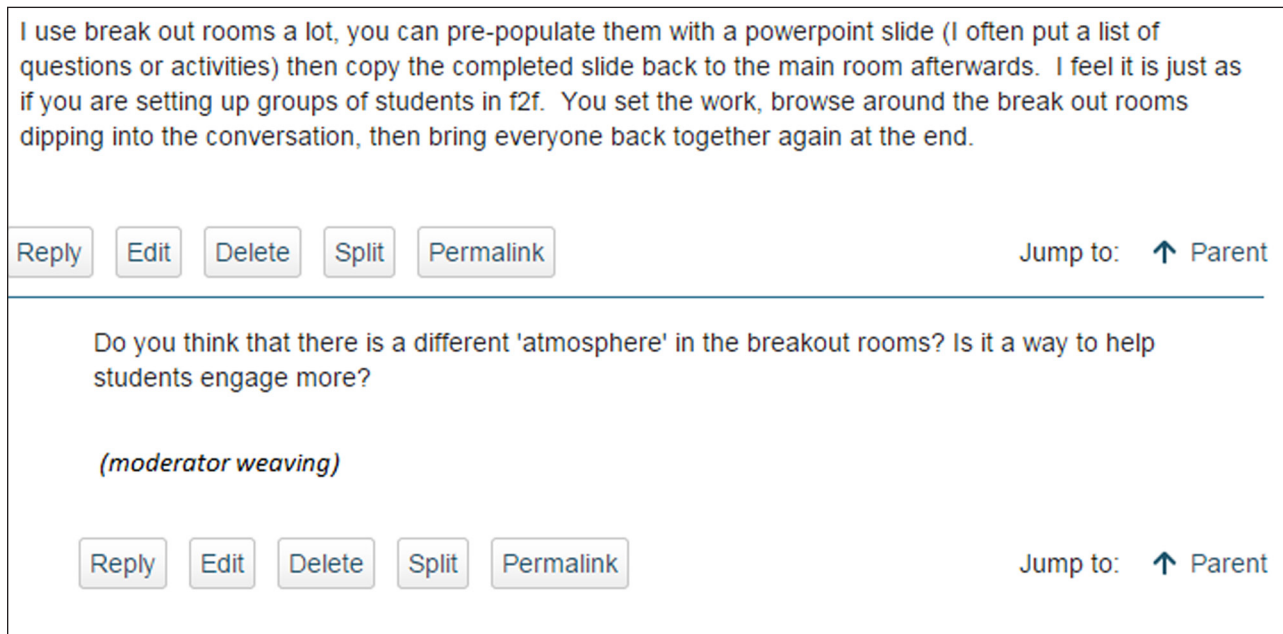
> I use break out rooms a lot, you can pre-populate them with a powerpoint slide (I often put a list of questions or activities) then copy the completed slide back to the main room afterwards. I feel it is just as if you are setting up groups of students in f2f. You set the work, browse around the break out rooms dipping into the conversation, then bring everyone back together again at the end.
>
> Reply　Edit　Delete　Split　Permalink　　　　Jump to:　↑ Parent
>
> Do you think that there is a different 'atmosphere' in the breakout rooms? Is it a way to help students engage more?
>
> *(moderator weaving)*
>
> Reply　Edit　Delete　Split　Permalink　　　　Jump to:　↑ Parent

**Figure 7:** Screenshot of moderator weaving to encourage discussion of a key theme. (From Sciences Online Rooms event.)

*It's quite hard to keep up with the forum posts (E9)*

*So many people, it was hard to see everyone's name (. . . in the live sessions) (T1)*

*There were a lot of contributions to the discussion board – I found it difficult to read them all, let alone reflect on the comments. I'm not sure how it could be otherwise, given the number of participants. [S33]*

We feel that the advantages of running an event which is time-limited to encourage participation, engagement and community building does outweigh this drawback. We ameliorated this somewhat by creating an archive of each event, which includes summaries of all the discussion topics, and access to presenter slides and recordings.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The *Talking point* design model allows small or large groups of geographically distributed staff to be brought together virtually within a defined short time-frame, and if the topic is timely and relevant, most distance staff relish the chance to connect with their peers whilst developing their own practice.

Almost all responses to the post-event questionnaires were very positive, with the online format and design encouraging attendance, including of some who find it difficult to attend face to face events:

*I look forward to any future events. Being based in the NE Scotland has been a barrier to attending face-to-face events in the past! [E8]*

*. . . particularly good for tutors with impairments for which travelling to venues can be a difficulty [T94]*

*More events like this please, it's easy to feel isolated as ALs especially with technology so this was great. [S3]*

The key features of the *Talking point* design which we believe can encourage learning are:

· The near synchronous forum discussions, moderated by peers who are skilled and knowledgeable on the topic at hand.
· The synchronous online sessions with workshops or presentations that are short, engaging, relevant to staff's working practices, and are timely.
· The short duration of the event, encouraging engagement and enhancing a sense of presence.

These features combined address the issues raised at the start of this paper, namely that of part-time, time-poor, distance teaching staff who, like their workplace peers, need access to informal learning, situated learning, peer interaction, networking and community building. Both the time-limited forum discussions and live text chat allow networking and community building, which can reduce a sense of isolation and can re-invigorate enthusiasm and belief in the institution and their own part within it. The choice of main topic is key, as staff are more likely to attend if the subject of the event is directly relevant to their own work. These two factors then contribute to the creation of informal situated learning, as through peer interaction, staff share knowledge and experience, and reflect together on best working practices. For most participants, the events we described gave a stimulating and quite intense experience.

There are additional organisational and technical factors which are critical, but as long as they are satisfied do not directly add to the quality of the event. For instance,

it is important to choose dates which do not clash with other commitments and also to give adequate notice of the event, even if at an early stage only a simple 'keep the date' message is issued. For this reason all these events for OU part-time distance staff were signposted some months in advance, and ran on Saturdays, so that staff with other working and family commitments would be more likely to be able to attend. Events run in an online environment can be at risk if staff cannot find their way to the site, or if systems or connections break down, and for that reason, having clear advice in timely reminders and technical help available on the day of the event is also important.

The main drawback of such time-limited and busy events is the large message base built in the forum. This can be mitigated by the provision of summaries, with guidance to participants (and other staff) on locating them within the archived event.

We have found that this model of online professional development is effective from a learning design point of view. Our evaluation questionnaires and the quality of the forum and live chat discussions show that knowledge and skills are shared and built; staff attend, engage, learn and build community.

Measuring how the events affect future behaviours and teaching practices is, of course, more difficult and is the topic of future evaluation work. Anecdotally from conversations with ALs and their line managers, we are aware that following the Science Online rooms event, many staff did adapt their online behaviours and improve practice (Level 3 in the Kirkpatrick's Four Level Evaluation model). We also know that from an institutional point of view the series of OU Live Transition events was a success, with senior staff commenting that the change of synchronous online software could have been a difficult process institutionally, but had instead gone very smoothly (Level 4 in Kirkpatrick's Four Level Evaluation model) (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Finally, we believe that the learning design of the Talking point initiative, incorporating web-based material, synchronous and asynchronous social spaces, a time-limited format, and skilled moderation by moderators, could easily be adapted to the needs of other institutions who must provide targeted and relevant professional development for part-time or distance staff.

## Competing Interests
The author declares that they have no competing interests.

## Acknowledgements

## Note
[1] In quotations from participants, S refers to the Sciences Online Rooms event, E refers to the Employability event, and T refers to the Transition series of events.

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