Exploring Google Hangouts for PhD Forums

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Forward

Online learning delivery modes are commonplace in today's education sectors. Within the US, online courses now make up 31% of courses offered to students (Educause, 2012). This shift towards alternative methods of teaching and learning is pushing the boundaries of technology, affordance and pedagogical design.

In recent years research has shown that distance learning is becoming and indeed is, part of a modern education system. Enabling students a study method of choice. The focus has largely been on the postgraduate distance learning courses as these students are seen to need less support from teaching staff and pastoral care than undergraduate. Asynchronous delivery is commonly used in distance learning to allow, tutors and students, to engage at separate times allowing considered responses, and detailed feedback. In contrast, synchronous learning allows highly interactive and real time environments to adapt to the flow of learning at a particular time (Monsur, 2005).

Historically there has been limited distance / online synchronous learning within Bath Spa University. In 2011, the institution purchased Google Apps for Education and email, document creation, and video conferencing became part of university education.
Introduction

In this paper, I will detail two pilots run by Bath Spa Learning Technologist John Sumpter and Senior Lecturer in English, Dr Tracy Brain. The project focused on the use of synchronous online learning, to facilitate building a community of learners (Salmon, 2002) across two disparate groups of PhD students.

The PhD in Creative Writing incorporated a low residency strand in 2012 that allowed international students to study at a distance, but work full time on their PhD. This additional strand provided an opportunity for additional collaboration, research, shared philosophies and support across different time zones and continents. For this to work effectively, it was imperative all participants (virtually & physically located) had a ‘presence’ (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) and felt part of a cohesive group.

Google Hangouts were used to facilitate the online synchronous events. The results of these pilots produced a series of best practices guidelines for use by academic staff.

Pilot One

The physical location for the first pilot was at Corsham Court, Corsham. Using a large meeting room containing a single rectangular glass table with seating for eight participants. The four online participants were located in various locations in America, including Hawaii. In addition to chair of the meeting Dr Tracy Brain, the online participants used Google accounts to gain access to the Google Hangout session that would facilitate the meeting of both physical and virtual participants. The virtual participants were projected onto a wall, displayed within the Google Hangout (See Fig 1).

Fig 1

The results of the pilot highlighted issues with the sound & vision quality. Specifically, the poor audio created the most problems, with students struggled to hear each other, and effectively participate in
conversations. Comparatively, the video did not detract from the experience, but in combination with the poor sound, participants felt a ‘them & us' feeling, and this was not ideal experience.

**Pilot Two**

The aim was to improve the experience from the last pilot. To do this, removing the sound quality issues and the ‘them & us’ feeling were key goals. The introduction of a professional table microphone and use of a HD webcam provided a much easier experience for both parties. The additional widescreen monitor placed at the end of the table, in replace of the wall projection, helped to bring the two parties together. In addition, two iPads were used to join the Hangout, and provide the global participants with additional views of the Corsham based participants. The two iPads were turned off after a short time due to poor feedback (sound interference) and the intermittency of the Wifi.

All participants felt the use of the use of a HD cam, professional microphone, and monitor at the end of the table created a better environment, and reduced the ‘them and us’ issues. The Global participants were particularly pleased with the introduction of the professional microphone.

**Implications for Further Research**

From the start of the project it was clear the introduction of technology to allow two groups to collaborate was a radical shift for an institution that had not moved beyond basic Skype sessions. This short pilot has shown that it is possible for a group of postgraduate researchers to engage in scholarly activity from a different location synchronously. Furthermore with relatively little technical knowledge, and using computer equipment that is seen as commonplace in today's education sector. Indeed 75% of students say that technology helps them achieve their academic outcomes (Educause, 2012).

Best practice guides (Fig 2) have already been created based on the findings from pilot two. The next step will be to promote and incorporate the project into different programs.

*Fig 2*
References;


ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology, 2012.
