

## Use of innovative technologies on an e-learning course

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### Abstract

This paper examines how four innovative Internet technologies were incorporated into one course at The UK Open University. The technologies were: blogging, audio conferencing, instant messaging and Harvard's Rotisserie system. Each of the technologies is addressed, and details from the student evaluation are provided. The student feedback on all the technologies was positive. The role of the learning object based course design is examined and it is suggested that this approach facilitates the incorporation of innovative technologies into a course. The authors suggest that as students become increasingly accustomed to standard communication tools such as asynchronous bulletin boards, there will be a shift towards implementing a range of technologies, each offering particular affordances for different forms of communication.

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*Keywords:* Learning objects; Instant messaging; Blogging; Educational technology; Online communication

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### 1. Introduction

The use of new technologies on courses often raises issues of pedagogical appropriateness, technological determinism, student workload, access and faddism. However, it is also the case that technology implementation in a positive learning experience can be one of the strongest influencing factors in their subsequent uptake. Many Internet technologies that were once seen as new and innovative are now considered mainstream, such as web sites, asynchronous text conferences, streaming audio/video and even synchronous collaboration tools such as shared whiteboards. All of these tools are

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commonly found in commercial Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) while several new technologies have emerged in their place. Although this new set of technologies has already received considerable attention in popular culture and is widely used in specific non-educational contexts, they are still adopted only at the margins in education.

This paper sets out how four such technologies were employed on a course developed at The Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK). The technologies were: blogging, audio conferencing, instant messaging and Harvard's Rotisserie system.

The paper will address how the technologies were used, how the students experienced and used the technologies and how implementation meshed with the course design.

## 2. The course

The course, which is the focus of this paper, is part of a Masters Programme in Online and Distance Education offered by The Open University. The course, *Learning in the Connected Economy*, is delivered at a distance, based on online activity and while it offers various forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication, there is no face-to-face meeting. Now nearing the end of its second presentation, the course was first presented from March to October 2003 with 55 students, about half of whom were UK residents and the other half located all around the world. The evaluation referred to here is based on this first.

The course as a whole examines the impact of the Internet and connectivity on learning from an individual, organisational, implementation and social perspective. The content of the course is constructed of 155 learning objects presented over four blocks. Each block lasts for 2 months, adopts one of the course perspectives and is 'pre-versioned' to stand potentially as separate short courses in their own right. The learning objects use text, audio, animation, webcasts and audio conferencing activities to cover areas such as costing e-learning, organisational change, online communities and digital divide. In addition, the educational potential of new technologies such as instant messaging, collaborative tools and blogging are explored. Each object is autonomous so that it can be re-used, removed or altered with relatively little consequence for the remaining objects. Each object is sufficiently rich and complex to achieve a specific learning outcome, but because of the learning object format, the order of study and choice of objects studied can be varied by the student. One of the core principles of the course was that of choice – giving students opportunities to select which learning objects to include in their final assessment portfolio, the depth and the depth of study of each object—depending on their personal interests, job relevance or time and inclination. The course was deliberately designed to appeal to both the higher education and corporate sectors and an international audience, through providing a wide range of substitutable topics and supporting several possible levels of engagement.

## 3. The technologies

### 3.1. Blogging

Web logs or blogs, have become the fastest growing use of the Internet over the past year or so. Blood (2000) differentiates between two types of blog—the journal, which acts as an online diary and contains

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