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The Discourses of Teaching and Learning Online

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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Edna Esteves dos Santos,
who has always encouraged me and is my source of strength and inspiration.

Examiners: Dr Charles Crook (The University of Nottingham) and

Dr Theresa Lillis (The Open University)

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Abstract

This research investigates the discourses of e-learning and the way in which these discourses underpin the practices in the field. Having reviewed the relevant literature and looked at the teaching practices in two case studies, I propose that the collaborative learning discourse is very significant in e-learning, but that the didactic and institutional discourses, although not as immediately evident, are equally important in shaping the practices of online teaching and learning.

The intertextual nature of all texts, in particular the different voices found in the language of the tasks in the case studies, reveal that the practice associated with online teaching and learning draw on texts and voices from three discourses, collaborative learning, didactic and institutional.

Drawing on a Foucauldian perspective of discourse, the investigation of how the discourses operate at the level of practice makes it possible to look at the teaching and learning practices in the field of educational technology from a discursive perspective. In so doing, the historical and contextual perspectives embedded in the teaching and learning practices are taken into account, the aim being to understand the complexity and range of elements that help construct these practices.

Finally, the contributions of the study to the field are identified, and some suggestions are made regarding the possible direction of future research.

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1 The discourses of teaching and learning online

1.1 Introduction: my journey behind this study

When I first proposed this thesis in 2003 I had a series of speculative theories about teaching and learning online in mind that I wished to explore. I had been working as a higher education lecturer for four years in Brazil in the field of the social sciences, and I had seen how online teaching had taken off in the beginning of this millennium in the country. I had also taken a few online courses myself, both in Brazil and in the UK, and had developed my own understanding of the practices in such environments: what seemed to work and what did not seem to work that well.

For example, I felt that the online courses I had had the chance to study or to informally observe appeared to be sold like 'packages', ready to consume: their task design did not take into consideration any sort of individuality on the part of the students, or any sort of information that could have been obtained through a diagnostic assessment of the students or their learning preferences. Not that it would necessarily be a common practice in face-to-face courses either, but as I saw it, the personal contact with the students in face-to-face environments had the potential to help inform how the course would be presented, which did not happen in the online mode.

The online courses I had taken did not seem to offer any flexibility with regard to the ways in which students could complete allotted tasks. The courses actually appeared

to draw on a very traditional way of teaching (e.g. the teacher as the knowledge holder and responsible for transferring knowledge to the learners), superficially masked by modern characteristics in the form of new technologies, such as the Internet and virtual learning environments. In terms of the teaching approaches in these courses I had the opportunity to take, I wonder whether the infamous 'banking concept of education', heavily criticised by Paulo Freire (1970), in which the students were seen as a depository of information and did not have their previous experiences valued nor their aims and goals or individuality taken into consideration, was being repeated in this new online mode of study. I am not suggesting that this traditional model is a bad model, but at the time I sensed a general perception amongst tutors that a traditional approach to teaching online was considered to be inappropriate and out of date.

In addition, the literature on online teaching seemed to point to the need for new approaches for teaching with the new technologies. It appeared that the popularity of collaborative learning was supported by a general view that group work was the best way to learn because the student would have the chance to communicate with other students located in different regions, and that it would give them the opportunity to construct their learning together.

However, from my personal experience as a student in online courses at the time, collaborative group work was my least favourite activity. I did not like to have to wait for other students to complete a task and our conversations did not usually go much further than a mere division of tasks. On the one hand, I could not see people learning and constructing knowledge together (Dillenbourg, 1999), as the premise of collaborative learning approach seemed to suggest. On the other hand, as a tutor myself, I was fascinated by the potential behind collaborative learning when applied to online education contexts. It seemed to me that there was an opportunity to make the most of what the technology had to offer, and the use of collaborative learning as a teaching

approach could help to explore a number of ways in which students and tutors would be able to work together online efficiently and creatively.

Therefore, I kept asking myself “why was it the case that I did not like to take part in collaborative learning activities”? “Why was it the case that I, as a learner, could not really identify any (or very little) collaborative construction of knowledge taking place in the experiences I had had”? “What was going wrong”?

Online distance education was a field of rapid growth within the higher education sector across the world at the time, and therefore seemed to be an interesting field of study. What was most latent in me was the perception that although the online courses that I had taken attempted to trigger real collaborative learning experiences between the students, the outcomes were usually rather traditional (e.g. learners studying individually and putting together their *pieces* of work at a later date to complete a learning activity). As I intended to pursue a doctoral degree, I thought that my questions could be a starting point for the development of a research proposal.

In my initial research proposal I proposed investigating the causes of the complex transfer of academic theory into pedagogic practice in online learning. By ‘complex’ I mean the ways in which, as I mentioned above, sometimes the teaching practices did not bring about the intended outcomes. And by ‘theory’, I mean the pedagogical approach that is pursued in the online learning teaching practices, and the written (or spoken) guidelines on how to teach, which are usually offered to tutors and course authors by the institutions. I drew on my existing background on discourse analysis to propose a study in which ‘discourse’ would be both an object of analysis and the theoretical approach underpinning my data analysis. My rationale was that by investigating the discourses embedded in the practices, I would be able to explore why there seemed to be some mismatches between the teaching approaches claimed to be used (e.g.

collaborative learning) and the actual outcomes of the practices (e.g. traditional ways of studying, such as individually).

Discourse is understood in this thesis as a mode of action, constituted of history, context, and conventions. Discourses are instantiated in language, in both written and spoken texts. Discourse¹ is a particular way of constructing a domain of social practice through language-in-use (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, by finding out what were the main discourses present in the practices around teaching and learning online, I would be able to explore some of the elements that constituted these discourses and regulated the practices as they were. I proposed therefore to look into the following initial research questions:

1. What are the main discourses embedded in e-learning practices?
2. How do these discourses shape the practices?
3. How can a discursive perspective be useful in course design?

In order to do this study I looked at two online higher education courses. These courses were offered in Brazil and in the United States in 2005 and 2006 respectively. They provided me with rich data in which to analyse the teaching practices of these different contexts through the language and discourses associated with them.

This thesis aims to bring a contribution to the field of *Educational Technology*. By adopting a discourse approach to look at the role that language has in shaping e-learning practices I propose to look at some of the complexities and contradictions that appear in the relationship theory-practice, that is, how the teaching approaches appear in use, and

¹ Further explanation of how 'discourse' is used in this thesis takes place in chapter three.

how the discourses associated with them affect the actual practices. This relationship is underpinned by the discourses instantiated in the language of the learning tasks.

The findings have the potential to make the underlying discursive mechanisms underpinning these practices more visible to the practitioner, furthermore providing a range of perspectives in which to think of the language of tasks during and after the course design process; and how language shapes these practices.

1.2 An overview of the thesis

In chapter 2 I discuss how in the past decades there has been a shift from a cognitivist view of learning to a more social perspective in the educational field, and how this perspective is often put into practice by means of the collaborative learning approach. I look at collaborative learning from a 'discourse' perspective, and identify the other discourses that are embedded in online learning practices, such as the collaborative learning, the didactic and the institutional discourses.

In chapter 3 I reflect upon the role of language and discourse in the practices of online learning. I discuss 'language as discourse' and attempt to show how language and discourse are interconnected. Finally, I discuss in more detail how I refined my research questions.

In chapter 4 I introduce the two case studies of this thesis and discuss my collection method and analytical approach to the data. I introduce case study as my research method and explain how I use the concept of 'voice' in the analysis. I also discuss how I explore the main themes of analysis, which emerged from both the literature review and the data.

In chapter 5 I present my first case study, a specific presentation of an online course in a Brazilian university, Unis@Digital. I provide an overview of the course, which was

taught by me, and of the context. I explore how my roles shift (from teacher to facilitator) during the course by looking at the various voices that are instantiated in the language of the tasks.

In chapter 6 I present my second case study, Syracuse University, in the United States of America. I explain that mostly I collected this data online, with the exception of a face-to-face interview conducted with the course tutor. Like in the Unis@Digital case study, I explore the shifting voice of the tutor and reflect upon the themes previously identified within this particular learning context.

In chapter 7 I bring the two analyses together in a general discussion. I explain how the discourses operate similarly in the teaching practices of the two case studies. I reflect upon the mismatches between theory and practice found in the cases and suggest a *discursive perspective* as a possible way forward in which to look at the complexities of the practices in the field.

In chapter 8 I summarise my research findings. I argue how this discursive perspective could make a significant contribution to the field. I also consider the limitations of the study and propose means of furthering this research.

2 *The discourses of e-learning: history, context and conventions*

2.1 Introduction

I start this chapter by exploring the literature on online learning. I discuss how there has been a shift from individual learning to a more social perspective over the past decades in the educational field overall, and how this shift appears in the online learning practices. I argue that this shift plays an important role in how task design in e-learning has been practised, particularly with the advent of the new technologies applied to education.

I then seek to demonstrate how this social perspective is often put into practice by means of adopting a collaborative approach to teaching and learning online, in which learners are encouraged to learn together with other learners and to construct their knowledge through peer collaboration. Online discussion forums have been common means of prompting collaborative learning in virtual environments, amongst other tools that have emerged more recently, such as blogs and wikis. My work focuses on the early stages of the use of forums to prompt collaboration. I also discuss some of the current research perspectives into the effectiveness of forums to enhance learning, and bring examples from the research in the field in order to illustrate what are the main perceived advantages and limitations of the use of peer collaboration in e-learning.

Finally, I look at collaborative learning from a 'discourse' perspective, and argue that e-learning practices are constituted of and shaped by discourses. I therefore seek to identify in the literature other discourses that interplay with that of collaborative learning. My view of discourses in this thesis is that they are embedded in history, context and conventions. I therefore investigate these discourses in a historical and contextual way, and seek to understand how they became 'commonsense' or 'conventional' discourses as far as e-learning practitioners are concerned.

2.2 Teaching and learning online: a focus in social learning

Over the past decades there have been a growing number of higher education institutions offering courses online. The advent of the microcomputer in the 80s and the popularization of the Internet in the 90s have prompted governments, researchers and practitioners to explore the affordances of such technologies for educational purposes. Since then there have been a number of different discourses of learning in higher education in relation to this new mode of study, which employs information and communication technologies. Conventionally, in every day talk, teaching and learning have been associated with the traditional model of education, one in which the teacher provides content (i.e. academic knowledge) to the learner either via a lecture or readings, and the learner is supposed to learn the content (usually by memorizing) and then demonstrate they have learned it by scoring high marks in exams. This model of education has been called the *transmission model* or *banking model*, (e.g. Freire, 1970) and the metaphor for learning that is associated with it is of learning as the 'acquisition' of knowledge (Sfard, 1998).² With the advent of Internet use for educational purposes, the discourses surrounding teaching and learning in higher education started increasingly to focus on *social learning* rather than on individual learning. Social

² Further discussion on the transmission and acquisition models of education is presented on Chapter 2, pp. 52-53

learning focuses on learners learning *with others* or *collaboratively*, whereas individual learning is usually connected with the traditional way of learning, the transmission model, as mentioned above. Microcomputers connected to the Internet opened up the possibility for learners and tutors to interact at a distance, either synchronously or asynchronously, at the same time allowing for educational resources to be remotely accessed:

“In the very short space of ten years, considerable effort has been invested in establishing the microcomputer as a significant resource within education. This effort has been evident in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors.”

(Crook, 1994:28)

“By the mid-1990s technological developments were beginning to signal a new set of parameters for both curriculum design and course delivery, and new conversations were developing about how best to support student learning.”

(Lea, 2007:23-24)

Part of these conversations Lea refers to has to do with the practitioners’ attempt to move away from the transmission model of learning, which was seen at the time as an undesirable way of teaching and learning.

Thorpe (2002) argues that gradually, in the 80s and early 90s, practitioners started to shift away from attention to the individual learner towards notions of collaborative learning. Collaboration, she argues, had been recognised as a very powerful stimulus for learning and became a model for education provision:

“[...] by the turn of the century, collaborative learning had become a topic of great importance in practitioner accounts, reflecting the enormous impact of computer-mediated communication and the web [...]”

Thorpe (2002:141)

Thorpe, however, does not disregard the role of theories of learning in pushing collaborative learning forward. She enquires whether theory led practice or vice-versa. To her, many theoretical insights recognised the power of collaborative learning. She argues, for example, that Vygotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development' gave new emphasis to the importance of others in the learning process. Vygotsky (1978) investigated the relationship between learning and development, according to the 'actual development stage' of a child and the 'zone of proximal development'. That is, a child may be assumed to have a mental level according to her age (actual development stage) but in fact be able to deal with problems up to a level of a higher age (zone of proximal development). These higher mental capabilities develop when a child operates in the 'zone of proximal development'; that is, when learning in collaboration with other more capable peers (a parent, a tutor, another learner, etc) the child is likely to achieve more. Vygotsky's theory reflects the constructivist perspective of learning, which argues for the principle of knowledge construction by making learners more actively involved in the learning process. Schunk (2004:291) says "Vygotsky's theory is a constructivist perspective that emphasises the social environment as a facilitator of development and learning". Vygotsky's theory is often recognised as a 'socio-constructivist' perspective of learning. Given the importance of such reflections on the learning process in the 80s and 90s, Thorpe takes the position that "both practitioner accounts and theoretical perspectives have worked together in their effects" (Thorpe, 2002:141). Thorpe's perspective, in my view, rightly suggests that the popularity of the collaborative learning approach to teaching and learning online came out of a combination of factors; including theories of learning and practice. This perspective also clarifies any suggestions that collaborative learning in e-learning became popular as a response to the communicative affordances of the new technologies in education. This is partly true, I would suggest, but not the only reason.

Underpinning the use of the collaborative learning approach there were also new theoretical perspectives on learning that evolved at the time. With this in mind I argue that the shift from individual learning to social learning resulted not only from the advent of the new information and communication technologies applied to education, but also due to a bigger shift in society towards a focus on the social, known as 'the social turn' (Wenger, 1998; Gee, 1999) or the 'cultural turn' (Jameson, 1998). In this thesis I use the term 'social turn' rather than 'cultural turn' because although the definitions of these movements are based on the same principles, the discussions of the 'social turn' usually revolve around approaches to literacies and related aspects of education, whereas 'cultural turn' usually refers to studies focusing on the new capitalism, arts and history.

Gee (2000) argues that in theories of learning there is a move away from the focus on *individuals* towards a focus on the *collective*. In this perspective, individuals do not learn in isolation but instead interact and learn via their engagement in the social, with others, by acting upon the collectiveness at the same time being influenced by it. Gee presents thirteen movements that he proposes are part of the social turn, and below I illustrate the three that would appear best suited to the context of this study. They are *sociohistorical psychology*, based on Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin's (1981) work and widely disseminated through the work of Wertsch (1985, 1991); the work on *situated cognition* (Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991); and *poststructuralist/ postmodernist work* (Bakhtin 1984, Bourdieu 1984; Fairclough, 1992/2000 and Foucault, 1973/1977). From the standpoint of *sociohistorical psychology* Gee points to Vygotsky's work on the understanding of the human mind. In this perspective the mind works through a process of internalizing and appropriating knowledge of the external world via the social activities in which one is engaged, so thinking is not private but mediated by technologies, culture, symbols, and language. The second movement is the work on

situated cognition, widely disseminated by Lave (1988) and Lave and Wenger (1991). When discussing the social turn, Gee argues that the work on situated cognition also builds upon the work of Vygotsky, in the understanding that knowledge does not reside only in the individual's head but is distributed across the social practices. Knowledge is also distributed across technologies and other artefacts that are used by particular communities of common interest to carry out their normal activities. These communities are called 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), and what their participants have in common is an interest and knowledge of a certain subject, usually developed over time. In these communities all participants have some sort of contribution to offer; they have something to share with their peer community members. These communities have 'their own rules' and act according to an etiquette developed by their own members.

Sfard (1998), when discussing what she calls the 'participation metaphor' of learning, suggests that this positions learners as 'newcomers and potential reformers' of the community's practice of which the 'norms are to be negotiated in the process of consolidating the community' (Sfard, 1998:6). Knowledge, in the situated cognition perspective, is distributed across this community and the individual makes sense of this knowledge (and contribute to changing and developing it) through a process of interaction with others. Finally, the third movement is 'post-structuralism and postmodernism' (Bakhtin, 1984; Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Fairclough 1992; Foucault 1973, 1977). According to Gee (1999:3) this movement started prior to some of the other thirteen movements that he discusses, which he argues are part of the social turn. It is a highly influential movement and has been receiving a lot of attention from philosophers, linguists, historians and sociologists over the past three decades, he claims. This movement is centred on the notion of 'discourses', which is a crucial notion

in this thesis. 'Discourse' in this movement is about ways of talking, writing and acting about people and things (Gee, 2000).

Gee's considerations on the 'social turn' bring to the fore a set of elements that contributed to the shift from 'the individual to the social' in education besides the advent of the new technologies. It was this combination of interdisciplinary factors that led towards a *social* way of thinking in various domains of knowledge, including online education.

Moreover, the rapid advance of technology in the late 20th century, and the changes in the ways people communicate (through a variety of online communication tools) and deal with the information available in the world also brought about new views concerning how education should be delivered. Bonk and King (1998:26) claim that "Technology is becoming increasingly interactive and distributed, such that individual learners have available, at rapidly declining cost, the means to participate in incredibly complex networks of information, resources and instruction". Educators increasingly started to draw on the use of new technologies to deliver content and enhance the learning process of their students. Crook (1998) argues that already in the late nineties tutors were encouraged to use more collaborative learning strategies. Part of the reason, he claims, is that "collaborative work is a statutory requirement in some areas of the UK National Curriculum" (Crook, 1998:238). In fact, from 1985-1986 to 2005-2006, the average ratio of students to staff has increased from 9.6:1 to 17.9:1. (University and College Union, 2007). This has led to the implementation of a number of new procedures to regulate teaching and research at universities, Crook and Cluely (2009) suggest. Amongst the changes, ICT has been highlighted as a popular way to coordinate the delivery of courses, meaning that e-learning is now present across most sectors of education (Crook, and Cluely, 2009).

It is a combination of factors, therefore, that leads to the implementation of e-learning in higher education institutions, such as the availability of new technologies, a shift from an individual to a collective perspective on how learning should occur (the Social Turn) and also the current situation of institutions having a rising number of students to be catered by the same number of staff. All these reasons contributed to the adoption of e-learning and collaborative learning as a teaching approach in universities in the UK and in other parts of the world.

In the next section I discuss some essential aspects of the pedagogical practices in online education that derived from this shift from the individual to the social.

2.1.2 Pedagogical practices in e-learning

In this section I focus on the new pedagogical practices that emerged with the shift from the individual to the social in online education, and discuss some of the implications of this shift in relation to the role of the tutor and the learner. But before I do that I shall discuss some aspects of online education terminology.

As information and communication technologies have evolved and new possibilities for technologies to enhance teaching and learning have emerged, new terminologies for online education have started to become popular. Online education terminology is an extensive area and I do not mean to explore it in depth here, but it is worth citing a few ways in which one could refer to online education. *Networked learning*, for example, is a known term in research in the field:

“[...] networked learning as learning in which C & IT is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources.”

(Jones, Asensio and Goodyear, 2000:18)

The term *networked learning* has been widely used in research in online education (Jones 1999, 2004; Asensio, Whatley and Jones 2001; Goodyear, Hodgson, Steeples, Asensio and Jones 2003; De Laat 2006).

In addition to *networked learning*, the term *computer-mediated communication*, commonly known as CMC, has also been used extensively in the online education literature (Romiszowski and Mason, 1996; Thorpe, 2002; Fischer and Ostwald, 2005). CMC encompasses email-based discussion lists, bulletin boards, computer-conference environments and other web-mediated manifestations of these types of communication, whether one-to-one or one-to-many (Romiszowski and Mason, 1996).

The term *computer-supported collaborative learning* (CSCL) has also been widely used in the research literature on online education (McConnell, 1994/2000, Scardamalia and Bereiter 1996; O'Malley, 1995; Koschmann, 1996, 2002, 2006; Bannon, 1995; Sthal, 2002; Kaye, 1995; Sthal, Koschmann and Suthers, 2006). As CSCL is studied in a variety of research fields, it has a complex relationship with other disciplines and a long history of controversy regarding its methods and definition (Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers, 2006). In a generic way CSCL research is concerned with computer support for collaborative learning; that is, how people learn through social interaction supported by computers.

The term *e-learning*, for its part, is popularly employed to refer to online education and has been used both by academics in the research literature (Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Mehanna, 2004; Goodfellow and Lea, 2007; Conole and Oliver 2007; Dyke, Conole, Ravenscroft and de Freitas, 2007; Conole, Oliver, Falconer, Littlejohn and Harvey, 2007) and by the public in general, outside academia. It refers to studying *electronically* (implemented on or controlled by a computer network). The term *e-learning* has been sometimes associated with "a naïve belief that classroom content can be digitized and disseminated to large numbers of students with little continuing involvement of

teachers and without the cost of buildings and transportation” (Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers, 2006:405). This view is perceived as problematic and because of this *e-learning* has received some criticisms. Stahl, Koschmann and Suthers for example, argue that it is not true that content published in the form of slides or videos is necessarily appealing to the learner. They claim that content in these formats can only be effective as part of a motivational context. They also argue that online teaching requires as much effort as classroom-based teaching, and is therefore not only a matter of making content available online without the support of a tutor.

Despite the criticisms, e-learning is a very popular term and more encompassing than some of the terms described earlier. Nowadays, its meaning can include reference to discussion forums and many other ways of interacting online, such as through mobile learning; i.e. the term is not limited to referring to content online, but also encompasses the communicative aspects of new technologies. It appears that it has been popularly used in different contexts of online education because its meaning is flexible. It is sometimes used to refer to courses offered entirely online and without the mediation of a tutor; sometimes to refer to courses with web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis; and at other times simply to refer to courses accessed via the Internet, with some sort of student-student and student-tutor online interaction such as the ones I present in this thesis. Goodfellow and Lea (2007) use the term *e-learning* to “describe the explicit association of learning in tertiary education with electronic and digital applications and environments” (2007:5). Conole and Oliver (2007) claim “e-learning is the term most commonly used to represent the broader domain of development and research activities on the application of technologies to education” (2007:4). ‘E-learning’ is therefore a popular, conventional and flexible way of referring to online education nowadays, both in academia and by the general public. For this reason I opted to make use of the term in

this thesis when I am referring to online education. It is used to indicate situations in which learners and tutors interact online and access learning resources electronically.

Returning to the discussion of the new pedagogical practices in e-learning given the 'social turn', the shift of focus from the individual to the social, I now consider the notion of *collaboration*. This theme could be discussed both from the face-to-face and e-learning perspectives, because in both modes of education collaborative learning is used. Although the literature on the theme can potentially be applied to both educational settings (face-to-face and online), I will try to concentrate my discussion under the perspective of e-learning. Collaboration, as argued before, started to be an essential part of e-learning pedagogy because it focuses on *social learning*; that is, on learners interacting with one another by means of using the new technologies for education. It is worth saying, however, that social learning can also occur individually, as all learning practices are social (e.g. individual learners interacting with content designed by others). Current online teaching pedagogies tend to focus on an understanding of social learning that has more to do with doing things together (such as working in groups, taking part in discussions, chats, etc) in order to have a greater achievement in learning. The notion of collaboration is defined by Sawyer (2006) as "[...] a process of shared meaning construction" (2006:415), and by Kaye (1992) as below:

"Etymologically, to collaborate (co-labore) means work together, which implies a concept of shared goals, and an explicit attempt to 'add value' – to create something new or different through the collaboration as opposed to simply exchanging information or passing instructions."

(Kaye, 1992:2)

The notions of *collaboration* and *cooperation* have sometimes been used interchangeably, although some authors do make a distinction between them. Jones, Cook, Jones and De Laat (2007) claim that the use of these terms often overlaps. They

argue that as far as a distinction can be maintained, *collaboration* implies a strong commitment to shared aims and mutual assistance, whereas *cooperation* has been used to define a division of labour in which individuals help each other in order to achieve their goals.

The notions of *cooperation* and *collaboration* are usually associated with the *collaborative learning approach*. In this approach learners are perceived as 'active', which is to say they are responsible for building their knowledge on interaction with their peer learners. Dillenbourg (1999) defines collaborative learning as "a *situation* in which *two or more* people *learn* or attempt to learn something *together*" (1999:2 - italics in original). Jones, Cook, Jones and De Laat (2007) dispute this definition, however, arguing that it is located within a single tradition of collaborative learning. They argue that Dillenbourg's specific aim was to bring together research from psychology and computer science, but did not take into account social and situated accounts of learning. To Jones, Cook, Jones and De Laat, the collaborative approach has another large source constituency, coming from a social critique of cognition and related to the cultural turn in the social sciences (Jones et al., 2007; Jameson, 1998). In this sense, my argument in this chapter seems to be in line with Jones, Cook, Jones and De Laat's (2007); when suggesting that the focus on collaboration between learners in e-learning is based upon, the shift on the social sciences from a focus on the individual to a focus on the collective. Jones, Cook, Jones and De Laat (2007) argue that it is unproductive to search for one single definition of collaborative learning. Instead, they suggest it is better to understand why collaboration is used in debates about education and learning with technologies. They argue that collaborative learning is a problematic area, showing both slight disagreements and significant differences at deep theoretical and philosophical levels. For example, collaborative learning is usually taken to mean learning in a small group of people, but there are readings on collaboration referring to wider social groups, as in

many types of specialized labour. Another example is that research has shown that collaboration helps students learn better (Webb and Palincsar, 1996), but some advocates dispute this idea and understand collaboration as an approach justifiable on other grounds (Koschmann, 1996; Stahl 2003). One of these grounds is *relevance*. Wolf, for example, (2002) suggests that current concerns with making education more directly relevant to employment have emphasized the need for teamwork approaches to education. No matter what perspective is taken, collaboration still seems to be perceived as an effective approach to teaching and learning.

Collaborative learning is also often placed as part of a bigger evolutionary movement within the learning sciences, that is computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), which I briefly mentioned previously. Stahl, Koschman and Suthers (2006:2) argue that computer-supported collaborative learning arose in the 90's, "in reaction to software that forced students to learn as isolated individuals". Since then, they argue, there has been an increasing interest in this field of study. Lipponen (2002) argues that technologies offer potentials for learning that are different from the ones found in other contexts. Some of the benefits, Lipponen suggests, are that computer networks break down physical and spatial barriers for collaboration, and that the delay in asynchronous communication allows time for reflection and interaction. It seems that the convergence of technology availability and the understanding that technology could connect people to the exchange of information, discussions and debates contributed to the uptake of collaborative learning as a chosen pedagogy for e-learning.

Stahl, Koschman and Suthers (2006) describe CSCL as a field within e-learning, representing what they then call the fourth and most recent uses of computers in education. Stahl et al. present a longitudinal perspective on the use of computers in education, divided into four models: computer-assisted instruction; intelligent tutoring systems; Logo as Latin and CSCL. The first use of computers in education, they argue,

was computer-assisted instruction. This was based on a behaviorist approach to computer-based education that was popular in the 1960s. In this approach learning was understood to take place via memorization, as in the transmission model. In this type of instruction the content was broken into small parts and offered to the students as 'drill and practice'. Stahl, Koschmann and Shuters observe that much commercial software nowadays still uses this approach. The second use of computers in education came about in the 1970s in the form of the intelligent tutoring system, which was based on analyzing students' mental models and representations. The third model, as described by Stahl et al., began in the 1980s and was based on a programming language called Logo, which provided stimulating environments for the learners to build their own knowledge. Finally, the authors argue that the fourth use of computers in education is CSCL, and suggest that it still represents the most recent type of use (Stahl et al, 2006). This may have been the case in 2006, but since then newer technologies and ways of working together have developed. The growing use of web 2.0 in the last five years is an example, with learners encouraged to blog, use wikis and other social networking tools to foster their engagement with the learning activities.

When I first started this research, learning collaboratively and sharing (thoughts, ideas, content, activities) was done mostly via virtual learning environments and their discussion forum features. Nowadays, however, learners make use not only of virtual learning environments and forums but also of a number of web 2.0 technologies that enable collaboration and sharing via the Internet. 'Collaborative learning' nowadays can be often replaced by the terms 'learning community' or 'social networking', for example, which are terms that developed with the latest e-learning research and the new technologies for education. Nevertheless, the basic idea of these approaches is the same. *Collaborating* and *sharing* are still the principles that seem to underpin e-learning

practices. In the following section I illustrate how the collaborative learning approach is commonly put into practice in e-learning courses.

2.3 How do practitioners 'do' collaborative learning?

There are many different ways in which practitioners apply collaborative learning in practice. Dillenbourg (1999) argues that a first criterion for collaboration is essentially an 'intuitive' one; that a collaborative situation should be *interactive*. As a matter of fact, the further research I present in this chapter will show that this is indeed frequently the case: practitioners believe they need to do collaborative learning and want to do it, but they are not entirely sure *how* to do it. A shared understanding, however, is that the tasks of the course need to promote interaction between the learners as a way to prompt participation.

In the early 90s Bruffee (1993) discussed the importance of collaborative learning in university education, and how it could be put into practice. His considerations were mostly based on collaborative learning use in face-to-face situations. However, Bruffee also discusses the appropriation of collaborative learning in distance education and encourages libraries, for example, to work together with television and computer programs to foster collaboration at a distance. In discussing the principles of collaborative learning Bruffee introduces the concept of *consensus groups*, which he considers "a basic model of classroom collaboration" (Bruffee, 1993:28). In this model, he argues, people work in groups on a limited but open-ended task, with the aim of achieving some kind of consensus or agreement. First, the tutor divides the class into small groups and provides them with a task. After some discussion the larger group is reconvened into a plenary session and all groups present their considerations. The next task is to discuss and reach an agreement as a large group. The tutor, he argues, should design collaborative tasks that help students transform the knowledge they bring to

class and apply it to the new challenges imposed by the task. Another role of the tutor is to evaluate the quality of the students' work. Bruffee emphasises that designing effective exercises and tasks to be done collaboratively requires a lot of thinking. Overall, questions should be designed with the aim of achieving group consensus. He considers closed-ended questions with a yes-or-no answer to be of "little value" (Bruffee, 1993:35). Interestingly, Bruffee argues for this sort of teaching practice in the light of Vygotsky's (1978) 'zone of proximal development' concept, which I discussed earlier:

"Effective consensus group tasks engage the collective labor and judgment of the group and keep students' interest focused long enough and sharply enough for the job to get done. They therefore fall within a band of complexity and difficulty defined by each class's collective 'zone of proximal development'."

(Bruffee, 1993:39)

Bruffee (1993) writes about practice, with the aim of encouraging tutors to change the ways they teach by changing what they think teaching should be like. The practice Bruffee encourages tutors to undertake is underpinned by a theory made explicit to the practitioner in his writings, such as in the passage above. Thorpe's (2002) argument that in terms of the popularization of collaborative learning, 'theory led practice and vice-versa' is illustrated in Bruffee's reasoning above, which shows the encouragement of practices moulded upon a cyclical motion of learning theory underpinning practice and conversely practice supporting learning theory.

Despite the apparent easy transferability of learning theory to practice that models of collaborative learning activities such as the above seem to portray, research has shown that collaborative learning is often a complex approach to translate into practice (Dillenbourg, 1999; Jones, 1999; De Laat and Lally, 2003). Dillenbourg (1999) argues that collaborative learning prompts a situation in which particular forms of interaction among people are expected to occur, but that there is no guarantee that such

interactions will actually occur. Due to this 'lack of guarantee' of results in the collaborative learning approach in the teaching and learning process, he says, practitioners are concerned with developing ways in which some types of interaction will occur. These ways, he argues, can be classified into four categories:

- *To set up initial conditions:* by carefully designing the collaborative situation. The tutor in this instance usually thinks of what would be the right size of the groups for the activities; the selection of members in relation to some criteria; which tasks are suited for collaborative processes or not;
- *To over-specify the 'collaboration' contract with a scenario based on roles:* for example by asking individual learners to assume specific roles in the argumentation or to take up specific positions;
- *To scaffold productive interactions by encompassing interaction rules in the medium:* for example by proposing the completion of open sentences such as "I propose to..."; "From my perspective..."; or by encouraging the response to questions such as "Do you agree?" or "Why do you think so?";
- *To monitor and regulate the interactions:* in this sense the role of the tutor is said to be essential for the success of collaborative learning. In this case the tutor is named 'facilitator' because the idea is not to provide the right answer but to perform a minimal pedagogical intervention. The facilitator should also monitor who is 'left out' of the interactions.

Most of the strategies for 'doing' collaborative learning that Dillenbourg presents are heavily dependent upon the design of the task. It is during the task design that the tutor (or course author) is expected to think of ways to make the activity interactive and inviting for participants (Bruffee, 1993; Dillenbourg, 1999). This is a central part of what

I am looking at in my research, evidence to see what extent the collaborative learning discourse is present in the task design of the courses in my case studies,

Oliver (2001), for instance, describes his experience of using e-learning to foster the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in his students. My intention in bringing Oliver's example in is to illustrate how he designed his course through the tasks he created, rather than the actual conclusion of his study in terms of critical thinking and problem solving skills improvement in the students.

Oliver had a group of 75 undergraduate students undertaking a course on ICT for 13 weeks. A new topic of study was introduced on a weekly basis by means of an open-ended task based on a problem. Oliver describes it as a "collaborative problem-solving" activity (2001:101). Students were divided into groups of 3-4 with the task of discussing the problem and making their suggested solution public in the bulletin board of the web-based learning environment. Groups were encouraged to read each other's solution and choose the one they considered that best approached the problem. The tutor was responsible to mark the solutions of the groups.

In this example Oliver (2001) is drawing upon the techniques that Bruffee (1993) describes as 'group consensus', although with slight differences in the design. At the core of Oliver's task are the collaborative principles of sharing ideas, engaging in collective thinking about a problem and reaching an agreed solution. Oliver provides an example of how practitioners translate the collaborative learning principles into practice.

Another example is that of Mason (2001:71-72), who describes an experience based on the concept of an online debate with students of a post-graduate course:

The course authors carefully chose a polemic statement that challenged some of the central course issues. This statement should be discussed during a period of

three weeks. Students were divided into groups and assigned roles such as moderators of the discussion, researchers, proposers, commenters, opposers and documentalists. Each group develops their discussion in their own online thread, although they have access to the threads of other groups. By means of using the 'history' function of the conference system, it was possible to track who read any particular message. Half of the students had read messages outside their own group and occasionally a few had made a comment about them. Mason argued that this way the learners could see the different ways in which people tackle the same question; and that this activity worked well in terms of fostering student participation at the same time as opening up a space for individual differences.

Mason's example also seems to be building upon the 'group consensus' model, though with less emphasis on reaching agreed solutions and more emphasis on valuing the individual process of reasoning and arguing.

The other example of collaborative learning in practice I shall present is that described by Bonk, Kirkley, Hara and Dennen, (2001). In this example they are concentrating on the role of the instructor, which they consider to be that of focusing attention on four aspects: pedagogy, social interaction, management and technology. The example is about a course titled 'Smartweb', intended for pre-service tutors:

Smartweb is a Web-based system that contains tools for students to comment on their peers' work, to create their own portfolios, to rate Web link suggestions, to create their profiles, and to keep content and activities. Due to the range of activities and tools, learners were pre-trained on the system and received a detailed online syllabus explaining the rationale of the course. Students were matched in pairs to work as 'e-mail pals'; and the grouping of the individuals was made in order to balance their abilities. For example, confident students were matched with those who were not. The role of the pals was to send reminders about tasks, give advice and overall online support as well as to comment on each other's work on a weekly basis. The tutor uses the Smartweb system to track the learners who did not complete their weekly task or did not perceive peer feedback. By using the email

tool, the tutors addresses individual needs and engages in specific individual inquiries. The tutor decides on when and where students will complete their work, interact with peers and link to external resources. The tutor therefore assumes different roles within the spectrum of pedagogy, technology, management and interaction in the course.

In this example, Bonk, Kirkley, Hara and Dennen (2001:67) focus on the various roles the tutor is expected to assume in order to create a collaborative learning experience online. The tutor in this example has full control over the syllabus and the ways in which the technology is used in the course. The students, on one hand, partly assume a role that has traditionally been considered that of the tutor, which is to comment and mark students' work as well as send reminders regarding tasks and completion deadlines. The tutor, on the other hand, 'monitors' everything that happens and intervenes whenever necessary, as well as defining grades and pointing students to messages from peer learners that may be of interest. The tools of SmartWeb and the teaching pedagogy set up around the system make the learning experience highly interactive. The technology in this case allows for new forms of teaching to be tested, and the tutor assumes new roles. In this model the tutor teaches students individually when needed, and also decides on the syllabus, the grades and on how the learning activities will progress. To some extent the tutor still has power to control what happens in the course. In this example the tutor draws upon all four categories defined by Dillenbourg (1999) as ways of trying to make the collaborative learning experience successful.

2.3.1 A typical collaborative learning activity: discussion forums

So far I have discussed how complex it is to translate collaborative learning into practice, and have used examples from the research of Dillenbourg (1999), Jones (1999), Mason (2001) and De Laat and Laly (2003) to illustrate some of the typical

activities that aim to prompt collaborative learning practices. In all these cases discussions and some form of guidance structuring seem to be essential. This section focuses on how collaborative learning is usually approached by tutors through the use of forums (also known as computer conferencing).

Virtual learning environments are perceived to encourage dialogue and active interaction between students, providing opportunities for engagement in a process of knowledge construction (Jonassen and Land, 2000). A social constructive perspective to learning suggests that learning is more effective when the students are able to discuss with their peers ideas and experiences (Jonassen, Davison, Collins, Campbell & Bannan Haag, 1995). This dialogical process is thought to serve as an instrument for thinking and engaging in cognitive processes that encourage higher level thinking (Jonassen et al, 1995).

Collaborative learning in the e-learning domain is often approached in the literature by means of systematic observations of computer conferencing. The popularity of these studies is due to the potential of virtual learning environments to support communication between users. Within a collaborative framework for learning online students are often expected to engage in discussions through the conferencing platform. *Discussion* is therefore a typical learning activity used to facilitate collaborative learning in e-learning.

A number of studies of the use of discussion forums in e-learning suggest that discussions are a type of learning activity that enable learners to critique others' interpretations and reflect on their own, making the crafting of counter-arguments not only possible, but also a sought-after outcome (Feenberg, 1987; Harasim, 1990; Kaye, 1992; Garrison et al. 2000; Buckingham, 2003; Gabriel, 2004; Mason and Romiszowski, 2004). Rourke and Kanuka (2007) suggest that there are several reasons for this, such as the recognition of the importance of discussions as part of intellectual work and the

development of ideas through peer collaboration. The overall idea supporting the use of discussion forums is that the engagement created between the learners through the computer conferencing medium maximizes learning, because learners can work together towards building on the ideas and practices of the group (Buckingham, 2003). This model of learners critiquing each other's ideas and building on their discussions to create knowledge is termed by Rourke and Kanuka (2007:107) a *dialectical* model. They describe this model as the 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' structure expected in discussion forums in e-learning. In this model, a student would propose an analysis of something (a reading, for example), another student would offer a counter-argument and through reasoned thinking they would come to a more sophisticated synthesis of their ideas. This dialectical model seems to be the idealised model of what the learners' interactions via forum messages would look like in e-learning:

"Participants learn from each other by working together with a common purpose on a common task'

(Buckingham, 2003:74)

"Dialogue among participants provides regular opportunities for reflection and inquiry"

(Wesley & Buysse, 2001).

Penna-Shaff and Nicholls (2004) support the idea that computer conferencing is a "remarkable fit for constructivist and collaborative approaches to learning" (2004:244). They perceive computer conferencing as a tool that not only allows students to interact asynchronously but also prompts them to review the information posted by peer learners, also allowing time for reflection when they post their own messages. They argue that because learners are not constrained to respond immediately, they end up analysing their own ideas more carefully, and in return, they gain better writing skills

and enhanced capacity to articulate ideas. In general, they suggest that asynchronous discussions in online environments can provide students with opportunities to develop sophisticated cognitive skills such as reflection, elaboration and purposeful construction of knowledge (Penna-Shaff and Nicholls, 2004:248). Out of a cohort of 40 students, their research reveals the following statistics for activity patterns in the data they analysed: 50% of the messages tended to refer to personal experiences and the use of examples; 34% to identifying and stating main ideas and assumptions for discussions and only 16% of the messages actually tended to establish a cause-effect relationship between the messages posted. Their research seems to point favourably to the efficacy of discussion forums as learning activities in collaborative learning. However, it also suggests that discussion forums do not always lead to the type of engagement expected from students. More about this assumption will be discussed further in this section, particularly through the research of Rourke and Kanuka (2007).

Penna-Shaff and Nicholls argue that students' rates of participation and interaction have been for years the most cited data on the educational benefits of computer conferencing. A lot of emphasis has been given to analysing quantitative indicators of the quality of learning taking place, but this alone is not enough, they argue. They suggest that it is more valuable to pay attention to the quality of the messages posted by the students, rather than the number of messages, logons and interactions they make. This perspective seems to be in line with the perspectives advocated by researchers such as Romiszowsky and Mason (1996) and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001). They all seem to come from a similar perspective that argues for discussion forum messages to be analysed by their individual quality, rather than quantitatively. In the last decade researchers had been suggesting that there were a lack of techniques and software to facilitate the process of sorting and analysing discussion forum messages (Romiszowsky and Mason, 1996; Rourke, 2001). Since then some studies have taken

place to address this issue, such as the work of Gunawardena, Lowe and Anderson (1997) and Rourke and Kanuka (2007) to cite a few.

Robert and Kanuka (2007), challenge the perspective that students' engagement via discussion forum maximises learning. They not only proposed looking at computer conferencing with a qualitative perspective, but also aimed to investigate whether there are considerable benefits for learning by engaging in discussion forums. They acknowledge that discussion forums have the potential to engage learners in knowledge construction, but argue that there is little evidence supporting its efficacy in engaging students in collaborative meaning making, despite the systematic observational studies of such media over the years. Supporting their argument is their study into collaborative learning (Robert and Kanuka, 2007), observing computer conferencing through a *critical discourse* lens. Note that the term 'discourse' in their study means the written interaction between the learners in a discussion forum, and not necessarily the discourse perspective that I take up in this thesis, that has more to do with the collective ways of thinking that help to shape the practices. By 'critical discourse' they mean a reasoned debate leading to critical thinking (Rourke and Kanuka, 2007:106).

Rourke and Kanuka analysed the barriers for critical discourse in online forums in a graduate distance education course. The findings suggest that although computer conferencing appeared in higher education over 20 years ago, it cannot be proven as an advantageous medium for facilitating critical discourse yet. Three reasons were proposed: 1. students' competing orientations toward the activity; 2. critiques are interpreted as attacks and 3. time limitations. By "competing orientations towards the activities" it is meant that not all learners understand the discussion forums as a space for mutual critique and discourse. This study shows that some students prefer to participate in the forums by posting warm and supportive messages to other learners, and such students perceive the discussion forums as socio-emotional interactions

(Rourke and Kanuka, 2007). Other students, however, may interpret critiques as attacks, and therefore prefer not to engage with peer learners in the discussions, tending to post only their own perspectives rather than providing counter-arguments to others'. Finally, Rourke and Kanuka also point to matters of time limitation. Most courses present deadlines and time pressures of all sorts, and the learners seem to struggle with keeping up with course pace and activities. All these factors contribute to the dynamics 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' not working as well as expected.

Rourke and Kanuka's study therefore suggests that there is a "seductive notion that computer conferencing is a particularly advantageous medium for facilitating critical discourse and therefore higher order learning" (Rourke and Kanuka, 2007: 120). They argue that not only this one but several other research studies challenge the idea that students' participation in discussion forums really helps them to engage in knowledge construction through collaborative meaning making.

Chen and Hung (2002) for example, argue that discussion forums lack the facility to support personalised knowledge representation. They suggest that forums have a lack of technological support, resulting in participants often feeling overwhelmed by the amount of messages in the forum, or feeling they have no ownership of most of the discussed issues. In either case, they argue, students feel de-motivated to continue participating. Chen and Hung use the 'library' as a metaphor as to what they perceive happening in online discussion forums in terms of an analogy of personalised knowledge. They argue that a library represents the state of current knowledge negotiated by the academic community. However, this knowledge is neither owned by the authors who wrote the books nor by the readers. What the library has is a collection of writings, which together form a body of knowledge open for reference. Each reader and each author will have their own representation of such knowledge. The ideal, Chen

and Hung argue, would be that one could “bridge the dialectic process between collective and personalised forms of knowledge” (2002: 281).

Chen and Hung do acknowledge that researchers such as Scardamalia and Bereiter (1999) for example, came up with useful technological tools to address the issue of collective knowledge representation (i.e. Knowledge Forum™). But generally, they argue, these learning environments do not support personalised knowledge representations. A personalised knowledge representation would be one that would have been built by the individual learner, to suit their own connections between the discussion forum messages, according to their perceived relevance. They propose a technological system which enables the learner to keep and store messages that they consider relevant and discard messages that they consider otherwise, this way creating a personalised representational system that is truly meaningful to them. This system would allow the learners to compare their own personalised representation with the collective one, and to retrieve previously discarded messages and their threads whenever they feel they are relevant. What Chen and Hung (2002) suggest is that discussion forums seem to focus more on supporting the construction of collective knowledge rather than supporting personalised understanding. In this sense technology is an enabler to collective knowledge construction but is often not prone to facilitating individual knowledge representations, and this is why more technological choices to discussion forums are needed, they argue.

Both Chen and Hung (2002) and Rourke and Kanuka (2007) seem to acknowledge the potential of discussion forums for the collective building of knowledge. At the same time, they acknowledge that this collaborative way of knowledge construction is not unproblematic.

In the following section I shall examine how research on collaborative learning has been aiming to unpack the acknowledged complexities of using the approach in practice.

2.4 Approaches to foster collaborative learning in e-learning

The empirical studies I present in this section aimed to foster the use of the collaborative approach in e-learning, mostly by investigating some key issues that affect its use at the practice level. First I focus on work directed to researchers and to practitioners with some research interest. Next I present some literature that is also research-based but directed mostly to the practitioner, in which it is possible to identify some trends and conventions of the practices.

De Laat and Lally (2003/2006) explore tutoring processes and collaborative learning in a networked learning environment. Their argument is that researching networked learning and online tutoring is a very complex task, because the nature of praxis in such networked environments is complex itself. Their study addresses both learning and tutoring processes within a group of collaborating professionals in an online learning community – students of a master's program in e-learning. Their main aim was to explore the potential of a multi-method approach to researching teaching and learning online, as their previous work had shown that the nature of interactions in such environments are multidimensional and so complex that they are not easily grasped with a single-method approach, they argue.

De Laat and Lally conducted a study with seven students and a tutor during a workshop which lasted approximately ten weeks. They were interested in exploring the relationship between knowledge construction (learning) and tutoring processes as these evolved during the workshop. They used a 'content analysis' approach to code and analyse participant's messages; and also Critical Event Recall Interview Techniques (Kagan, 1984 and Kagan and Kagan, 1991). Their coding categories were based on ideas, argument chains, topic of discussions, plans and explanations. Their codes, they claim, were designed to both identify cognitive expressions of the learning process of the individuals as well as processes that are social and that occur between the participants.

Amongst their conclusions is the idea that coding schemas for analysing e-learning practices present difficulties. The reason is that the attempt to categorise and quantify the meanings embedded in the exchanges between participants is very tentative and is also a considerable task given the number of messages and the complexity of the activities. They argue, for example, that some passages could have been coded using more than one category. They suggest that the use of coding is only a partial solution to the methodological challenges they identified in their study, because it provides little insight into key aspects of the individual and group processes; those that were not expressed in text messages. A significant finding, they claim, is the importance of recalling *tutors' thinking* during the learning events, which are not directly observed in the transcripts of the group's work. They observed that the tutor engaged in many analytical observations of his own facilitation process. His practices were based on his interpretations of the needs of the groups and on his own "largely unarticulated (in the group forum) values about the nature and purposes of collaborative learning" (De Laat and Lally, 2006:65).

They also suggest that the use of Content Analysis and Critical Event Recall Interview Techniques is an initial step towards the development of "a more sophisticated approach to the research of this complexity across these contexts" (De Laat and Lally, 2003:64). In my view the main contributions of this study are the explicit acknowledgement that research into online teaching and learning is challenging due to the complexity of the practices of the field; and also that the facilitation process of a course is embedded with the 'personal understandings' of the tutor regarding students' needs and teaching practices. These 'personal understandings' influence the development of the course.

De Laat and Lally drew attention to the need for mixed-methods to foster a conversation between theory and practice in e-learning. It seems to be an interesting proposition, as it

encourages researchers to experiment with new modes of analysis. They emphasize, however, that this study does not provide a theoretical synthesis of the frameworks they drew upon, and that in order to do so more research would be needed.

Their study seems to imply that collaborative learning practices in e-learning are complex and not at all easy to grasp by analysing the interaction between participants. They seem to suggest that a lot of what happens online is due to the ways in which the course is guided by the tutor, and that these ways do not appear in the interactions between students in the discussion forums. The 'tutor's thinking', however, does appear in other contexts of the course, such as when the tutor reasons with the students 'outside' the forums.

Before presenting more research on collaborative learning I wish to turn my attention to the new roles that tutors and learners are said to assume in this approach, which is an important aspect underpinning De Laat and Lally's research. I need, however, to clarify my use of the terms 'tutor', 'teacher' and 'facilitator' in this thesis. I use 'tutor' as a neutral term throughout the thesis, when I do not want to signal any particular approach to teaching. I mostly use the term 'tutor' in writing the thesis, to help me differentiate from the terms I use in actual instances of analysis, when I do want to signal a particular teaching approach. When I am analyzing the data I use the concept of 'voice'. I refer to the tutor taking up the voice of a teacher, the voice of a facilitator or the voice of the course-author. When I say that the tutor is taking up the voice of a teacher, I want to signal an alignment with the didactic discourse, that is, with the conventional view of the tasks that a teacher performs in a 'transmission model' of education: to teach the course, to mark student assignments, to restore order when needed, to have the voice of knowledge authority of the expert. The tutor taking up the voice of a facilitator indicates an alignment with a collaborative learning approach, in which the role of the tutor is to facilitate the course, mediate discussion forums,

provide technical advice, and guide the learning process. And finally, the voice of the course author is the voice of the one who wrote the course, who may or may not be the tutor. In the Unis@Digital case study for example, the voice of the course author most of the time belongs to the course coordinator, whereas at the Syracuse case study it mostly belongs to the previous tutor, who actually wrote the course before retiring. I do not however make any differentiation between the terms 'learner' and 'student', and tend to use them interchangeably.

In brief, in the didactic approach, the tutor taking up the voice of a teacher represents that idea that the teacher is the knowledge holder and is responsible for teaching this knowledge to the learner, mostly by means of lectures. The collaborative approach, on the other hand, is based upon a socio-constructivist view of learning in which the tutor is seen as a guide, a facilitator to the learner's learning process. Similarly, the learner assumes different roles in these approaches. In the traditional approach the learner is said to be 'passive', only receiving information from the tutor, whereas in the collaborative approach the learner is perceived as 'active'. This means that in the collaborative approach the learner is expected to construct their own knowledge through the interaction with other learners. However, in neither case the role of the tutor and the student is clear-cut in e-learning. There are elements of teaching in the role of the facilitator as my data will show, and moments in which the learners expect to be led by the tutor and therefore become more passive. The main point however is that every learning activity is different, and may be performed differently by different cohorts of students. The role of the tutor will therefore vary depending upon a number of factors, such as the task itself, the intended pedagogical approach, and the particularities of the group of learners.

Returning to empirical studies focusing on collaborative learning practices, I now wish to present a study by Jones (1999) that challenges these 'roles' of tutors and learners in e-learning by showing how in practice these boundaries are not very clear.

Jones starts from the premise that computer conferencing is usually associated with collaborative learning (Mason and Kaye, 1989; O'Malley, 1995; Jonassen, 1996). He argues that computer conferencing (also known as 'discussion forum') is often seen as appropriate to develop a co-operative style of work, with a concern towards the development of co-operative and collaborative learning strategies. Jones adopted an ethnographic methodology for his study, analysing students' accounts in course forums from 1994-1996. His conclusion challenges what he depicts as the widespread view that *collaboration* is a desirable activity in e-learning practices. His research shows that instead of collaboration being a successful affordance of computer conferencing it actually became a problem in the context he studied. He argues that educational changes advocating a new role for the tutor – a *guide on the side* rather than a *sage on the stage* – are actually a common 'gloss' (Jones, 1999:27, originally italicized by the author). Jones shows that the moderator/facilitator role of the tutor, usually portrayed as ideal in CSCL, is actually deeply embedded in wider social actions. His conclusion is that "the tutor controls the definition of what counts as success within the conference" (1999:33) and that the acclaimed shift in the role of the tutor, from knowledge-giver to facilitator, does not hold in the wider educational context, in which assessment and accreditation remain the driving practices of institutionalized learning. In this sense, I introduce the notion of 'power', in chapter 3, which I draw from the work of Foucault (1977). This notion helps me to explore the power roles that the tutor and the institution take in e-learning, and the impact of the institutional discourse on the case studies that I present in this thesis. I believe that Jones' conclusion to his study provides a great insight into the understanding of actual teaching and learning practices in the field of e-learning. In

my view he is dealing with some of the unnamed complexities mentioned in the De Laat and Lally's study discussed previously, bringing to the fore issues of interdependency in the learners, tutors and institutions' roles. I would also suggest that he is enquiring into the influential role of institutions as accreditation bodies in relation to the actual learning practices.

Another empirical study I shall draw upon is that of Jones, Asensio and Goodyear (2000). They carried out a study on the varieties of experiences that both experienced and novice practitioners in the field of e-learning may have. Their conclusions suggest that practitioners have a common philosophy but do not have what they call 'rules of thumb' in terms of teaching practices. For example, the authors found that practitioners who had a low level of participation in their courses express disappointment with the course outcomes. On the other hand, practitioners who did not experience low participation did not express disappointment with the course outcomes. Jones, Asensio and Goodyear suggest that the underlying issues behind disappointment could perhaps be connected with the level of practitioners' expectations. They found in this study that the 'common philosophy' practitioners have is that people learn collaboratively by sharing ideas, engaging in dialogue and discussion, and by engaging with the activity or task. This 'common philosophy', they argue, is related to the principles of the CSCL paradigm. In this study all but one tutor mentioned constructivist or collaborative approaches to learning in their interview. Nevertheless, several practitioners describe collaborative learning as a problematic approach. Overall, practitioners seem to identify collaboration as an aim but were concerned that it was difficult to achieve and difficult to conceptualize. Jones, Asensio and Goodyear claim "collaboration and participation were both features that exemplify the gap that practitioners experience between expectations and outcomes" (2000:25).

Jones, Asensio and Goodyear's study suggests that 'constructivism' and 'collaboration' are conventionalized perceptions of what an online course should promote for the learners. Without a clear distinction between the two, the tutors talk about their practices and argue, sometimes implicitly, that these are the premises they attempt to build their courses upon. They also recognize the complexities involved in transferring theory to practice, by arguing that collaboration is difficult to achieve (practice) and to conceptualize (theory). What is interesting, I believe, is the relationship between this study and that of De Laat and Lally (2003). De Laat and Lally also point to the 'unarticulated' (original emphasis) values and purposes of collaborative learning to the tutor. In addition they attempted to use a multi-method approach to understand how to bridge this gap between theory and practice, and conclude that online teaching and learning practices are too complex an area, and therefore need to be analysed by a combination of approaches from different perspectives. These three studies presented so far indicate that from both tutors and researchers' perspectives there seems to be recognition of a mismatch between academic theory and pedagogical practice somewhere in the e-learning context, which is difficult to pinpoint and which could be the main cause for the perceived 'failure' of certain courses. I believe that these studies open up room for a discussion of the importance of participation in e-learning practices and what this means. The study by Jones, Asensio and Goodyear (2000) in particular suggests that tutors tend to see *participation* as a form of 'doing' collaborative learning. It seems that e-learning tutors perceive participation as something very important, without which a course is usually considered unsuccessful.

Learners are asked to do course activities together with other learners, and exchange ideas, negotiate meanings, agree and disagree in their opinions. It seems that the traditional way of taking a course, in which it would be enough to do all the course tasks and get a good mark in the exam, is no longer enough. Besides that, the learner needs to

'be there', which is to say it is important they get themselves noticed by their peer colleagues and by the tutor. A lot of attention is focused on the 'online presence' of the learners. Sfard (1998) argues that a 'learning as participation' view emphasises the importance of the learner in taking part in learning activities rather than simply accumulating knowledge. In her words, 'learning a subject is now conceived as a process of becoming a member of a certain community' (1998:6). She argues that for someone to be a member they would have to be able to speak the community's language and to act in accordance with the community's norms. From this perspective, learning goes beyond acquiring knowledge about a subject. In order to be able to be part of a community, the learner must learn how to 'play by its rules', and if they do not manage to do so, they may be taken as unfit.

As has been noted with these empirical studies, *collaboration* is perceived as a very important part of e-learning. In the studies discussed so far, the researchers took a closer look into certain e-learning practices in order to try and understand more about both the theories underpinning the practices and the practices themselves. Interestingly, these studies seem to suggest that tutors show a tendency to prefer to use collaborative learning over other approaches but they do not know exactly how to do it. And when they do, they do not always get the results they expect. In addition, in theory, collaborative learning tutors seem to have their roles changed from the one who has the knowledge to pass onto the learners to 'facilitator', the one who just support and guide the learners. However, in practice, research suggests that it does not happen entirely, largely because the tutor still holds the power to make decisions and award points towards a final mark in assessments. Moreover, research indicates that e-learning practices are very complex. This seems to suggest that such a mismatch of theory and practice in e-learning comes about because of the complexity of applying theory to practice.

However, some popular e-learning literature geared towards the practitioner seems to suggest otherwise. Salmon's (2004) 'five-stage model' for teaching online is based upon collaborative learning principles. In her work she presents a model to be used by the tutor and argues for the idea that the e-learning tutor should be a facilitator:

'The e-moderator's main role is to engage the participants so that the knowledge they construct is usable in new and different situations [...] the goal of the e-moderator for this kind of learning is to enable 'meaning making' rather than content transmission.

(Salmon, 2004:52)

Her claim is aligned with collaborative learning principles in which the knowledge is considered to be jointly constructed by the learners. For her, "*e-moderators* are the new generation of teachers and trainers who work with learners online" (Salmon, 2004:vii). Her 'five-stage model' to teaching online is, in short: 1) access and motivation, 2) socialization, 3) information exchange, 4) knowledge construction and 5) the development stage. These stages address a variety of aspects that typically appear in an e-learning course, for example aspects of the learner familiarization with the computer and the virtual system, and the process of group knowledge construction online. One of the criticisms to her method, I would suggest, is that her method can be seen as a 'recipe', implicitly claiming the capacity to bring about the perfect desired interaction among the students during the course.

Weller (2002) takes a critical approach to collaborative learning and instead of providing a method he provides a list of pros and cons of this approach. Amongst the advantages are: the opportunity for reflection; active learning (as opposed to the view of learner as a recipient of information); the opportunity to develop communication skills; the promotion of a deeper understanding of concepts due to the interaction with other learners, and the broad scope of topics the learner is exposed to due to the diversity of

ideas. He also points out the most common disadvantages of collaborative learning, which are: reluctance and resistance from students who prefer to work individually; groups that do not get on well because of lack of input or personality clashes; the time taken to perform group tasks can be excessive if there is a lot of debate and negotiation of which roles the members of the group will adopt and on task allocation; resentment from members who feel they are doing most of the work; how to cope with the students who drop out of the activity or the course; the failure of the group work can be very distressing for some group members; and, finally, the loss of independence. Many students prefer to work at their own pace, independently of others. All the above apply equally to face-to-face collaborative learning. Weller (2002) argues that even the most sophisticated pedagogies in face-to-face teaching do not translate well to teaching via the Internet, and therefore an approach that places less emphasis on the educator and more on the learner, and that positively encourages communication, is ideal. Although Weller recognizes that there are both advantages and disadvantages to collaborative learning in e-learning, it does not seem to be his aim to provide a more extensive discussion or empirical study of the topics.

In these two examples of literature geared towards the practitioner in e-learning, although there is an attempt to provide the practitioner with ideas on how to apply the theoretical principles in practice, and also to identify both the advantages and disadvantages of the approach, there seems to be a lack of a detailed discussion of the possible factors that mediate the transfer of collaborative theory into pedagogical practice, and of how to avoid, identify, understand and overcome them. For this to happen, I would suggest that more empirical study is needed.

So far I have argued that the frequent use of collaborative learning in e-learning practices has to do not only with the advent of the new technologies in education but also with a major shift of focus in society, from the individual to the collective. In

educational terms this shift is from an individual to a social view of learning, in which learners are expected to learn together. In the next section I turn to a discussion of collaborative learning under a more specific type of lens, namely a discursive one. First I look at some of the different perspectives from which 'discourse' has been dealt with in the e-learning field; then I look at collaborative learning as 'a discourse', and how, as such, it shapes e-learning practices; and finally I seek to identify other discourses around e-learning practices in the literature.

2.5 The discourses in the e-learning practices

At the beginning of this chapter I expressed the view that discourses are constituted of history, context and conventions. In this sense I argue that collaborative learning can be approached as a *discourse*. As I explored previously, collaborative learning is an approach born out of research into learning, based on the principles of socio-constructivism. In this sense collaborative learning can be defined historically, and said to be appropriate for particular contexts of learning. It is also a conventional way of designing for e-learning nowadays. Therefore it is a discourse in the sense that it defines ways of thinking of and talking about things. The *collaborative learning discourse* is a powerful discourse in the e-learning field due to the ways in which it underpins the articulation of practices. The main characteristics of this discourse are a focus on participation, on collaboration and dialogue between course participants, and a focus on the facilitator's role for the tutor.

Discourses are not fixed; they act by interplaying with other discourses. The fact that they do not have fixed boundaries makes them fluid enough to blend together with other discourses and create new ones. In chapter three, as previously stated, I discuss these characteristics further. But for the moment it should suffice to say that a discourse does not act alone. Where one discourse can be found, there are certainly others

interplaying with it. In the literature I have presented so far a lot has been said about the scenario in which collaborative learning emerged and what it reacted against. It has also been discussed that collaborative learning grew in popularity in the higher education scenario as online distance education started to gain attention in universities. By looking at the context in which the collaborative learning discourse is inserted, it is possible to identify two other discourses interplaying with it: *the didactic discourse* and *the institutional discourse*. The didactic discourse relates to what could be called a more traditional model of education, often referred to as the transmission model or acquisition model. The didactic discourse is illustrated in teaching and learning practices where the teacher is the central figure, the one who holds the knowledge which the students are supposed to learn. It is concerned with those practices that traditionally have been part of the teaching and learning process: a tutor who teaches, a student who learns, pre-defined course content, and assignments to check the students' learning progress. The learners are expected to demonstrate that they learned what they have been taught.

Amongst those who discuss this didactic approach are Dyke, Conole, Ravenscroft and de Freitas (2007). Based on an e-learning perspective to teaching and learning, they take the view that the didactic approach focuses on learning through association and reinforcement, and on observable outcomes. They suggest that much of the current online teaching and learning development represents the transfer of didactic approaches to the online environment, as for example having some content on a web page which links directly to assessment and feedback. Another implicit critique of the didactic approach can be found in Knowles (1973/79), from the adult learning field. Knowles argued that educators should be ready to draw on learners' own experiences when possible, and be aware of the tasks they are engaged in outside the learning environment. He also argued that educators should not focus on decontextualised topics and skills, and should rather strive to understand and respect peoples' own motivations for learning.

The perspective I take on the didactic approach in this thesis draws on Sfard's concept of the "acquisition metaphor" (Sfard, 1998). Sfard concentrates on two basic metaphors, the acquisition and participation metaphors, to explore the tacit assumptions and beliefs that tend to guide our commonsense perspectives on teaching and learning. She argues that metaphors underlie both our spontaneous and scientific thinking, and are engraved in the language we use (Sfard, 1998). The acquisition metaphor, according to her, represents the idea of the human mind being filled with knowledge – a conception that dates from the "dawn of civilization" (Sfard, 1998:5), which sees learning as the accumulation and appropriation of concepts, materials, and contents. In the language we use to talk about learning, the acquisition metaphor tends to appear as in concepts such as 'transmission' and 'internalization' of knowledge. From this perspective, knowledge is seen as a commodity that, once transmitted and acquired, may be applied by the learner, transferred to other contexts and shared with others. When I refer to the didactic discourse in this thesis, this is the perspective I am referring to. Didactic discourse appears in teaching and learning practices that are primarily informed by this acquisition metaphor of learning: the transmission of knowledge including traditional teaching and learning practices such as lecturing, explaining, memorising, and replicating. Therefore, my use of expressions in this thesis such as *traditional* model of education, *transmission* model, *acquisition* of knowledge, amongst others similar expressions, equate to the didactic discourse and the *learning as acquisition* perspective.

Following Sfard, I do not imply a negative comparison between didactic and other approaches to teaching and learning. Sfard indeed points out that there is a very rich range of terminology to talk about the idea of learning as gaining possession over a commodity (knowledge acquisition). The contrast arises from the participation metaphor being a new metaphor, argues Sfard (1998). Learning in the participation metaphor has to do with contexts, cultural embeddedness and social mediation, and with becoming "part of a greater whole" (Sfard,1998:6). This metaphor is present in the language through

expressions such as 'collaboration' and the 'social construction' of knowledge. The participation metaphor is what underlies the collaborative learning discourse I refer to in this thesis.

Sfard's main argument, however, is that we need both metaphors to inform our approach to educational practice. The shifts we make between the acquisition and the participation metaphors are actually essential, as "an exclusive instructional prescription could become the worst enemy of success" (Sfard,1998:10). She argues that because no two students have the same needs and no two tutors arrive at their best performance in the same way, an adequate combination of the two metaphors is needed to bring to the fore the advantages of each of them:

"In the spirit of this approach, acquisitionists and participationists might admit that the difference between them is not a matter of differing opinions but rather of participating in different, mutually complementary discourses". (Sfard, 1998:11)

In this thesis, complementing Sfard's perspective, I argue that both discourses naturally coexist in practice, and I do not attempt to imply that one is to be favoured over the other. However, I argue that educational systems generally are built upon practices of teaching and assessment that fall within the didactic model (e.g. pre-defined content, 'teaching by telling', assessment, exams, marks), and that the interplay of this discourse with the newer practices of participation and collaboration, particularly in e-learning, produces a complex pedagogical landscape for higher education.

Alongside the didactic discourse there is the institutional discourse, constituted of all academic rules and conventions that are part of a university context, such as exams and marks (assessment), the academic calendar (which defines the timescale of learning), the role of the tutor as an employee bounded to organizational rules and conventions, and the role that a university has in relation to the wider society. And in fact there are yet more discourses interplaying with them, but for the purpose of this thesis I will limit

my discussion to these three: the collaborative learning, the didactic and the institutional discourses. These are, in my opinion, the most evident discourses in the e-learning literature, and also the most significant ones for gaining an understanding of e-learning teaching practices.

In the literature of this chapter the didactic discourse can be found, for example, in the discussion of the social turn. A characteristic of the didactic approach to teaching is to be focused on the individual learner and their strengths and limitations. A characteristic of the collaborative learning approach, meanwhile, is to focus on the achievements that can be gained via learning with others. This was what the social turn was about, a push away from the focus on the individual to a focus on the collective. The didactic discourse can also be found in the interaction of the tutor with the learner, when for example the tutor teaches individually the learners that are falling behind, as shown by the SmartWeb example. The didactic discourse is also embedded in the ways in which the e-learning courses are conducted, in which very often, as demonstrated here with Oliver's (2001) example, the tutor has the power to designate marks and to control the flow of activities. The institutional discourse, for its part, can potentially be found in all education practices that are regulated by an institution. For example, in this chapter I drew upon Goodfellow and Lea's (2007) argument that e-learning seems to foster technological agendas and policies in higher education which are closely aligned with the needs of employers, as a result of which higher education has been lacking a focus on epistemological knowledge. The institutional discourse is also found in the evaluation practices and in the understanding that a good level of student participation in the course is an indicator of success.

This chapter also showed that there seems to be conflicting ideas in relation to the efficacy of collaborative learning in e-learning. It is generally accepted by researchers that collaborative learning techniques for learning (such as discussion forums) have the

potential to increase the efficiency of learning, due to the dialogical nature of this activity, that enables individuals to engage in higher level thinking by assimilating, critiquing and counter-arguing the ideas of peer learners. At the same time, there is a concern that this may not always be the result of collaborative approaches. There is limited evidence that discussion forums allow learners to engage in individual knowledge representations, and some research suggests that learners tend to use the discussion forums in different ways, according to their own perceptions of its purpose (Rourke and Kanuka, 2007). Therefore, the challenge posed by the use of collaborative learning in e-learning seems to be that it does not always demonstrate the shift from 'individual learning' to 'group learning', as discussed in the beginning of this chapter; which raises further questions of how to make group learning a personalized learning experience.

It seems therefore that collaborative learning can be complex for both students and tutors, in different ways. Tutors often try their best to implement collaborative learning techniques in their virtual classes but do not always seem to achieve the expected outcomes. This may be due to technological barriers (such as the lack of software that encourages more organised and meaningful discussion threads), or due to a certain lack of clarity concerning ways to implement how to implement collaborative learning, as research presented in this chapter showed. Students on the other hand, may find it difficult to work collaboratively due to lack of time to engage in discussions, due to their different perceptions of how to use the forums or even because they may feel sensitive to criticisms coming from other learners, amongst an array of other possible reasons.

The complexity of collaborative learning in e-learning may have a number of different reasons. What this thesis aims to offer, however, is one perspective from which to look into this complexity, that is from the perspective of the discourses of teaching and learning online.

In the following chapter I discuss the concept of discourse I used in this thesis in greater depth, and explain how discourse is both my theoretical and analytical framework.

3 *A discursive perspective on e-learning practices*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter serves three purposes: to locate the thesis theoretically, to provide a reflection on the role of language and discourse in e-learning practices and e-learning research and finally, to refine the research questions. I start by discussing the first two aspects – discourse theory, and language and discourse – as they are interconnected, then move on to refine the research questions. I now briefly describe how I approach each of the three aspects that this chapter aims to cover.

Firstly, I define how I use the term ‘discourse’ in this thesis, and how this definition is based on a Foucauldian² perspective of discourse. I introduce the notions of interdiscursivity and intertextuality, and discuss them by drawing mostly upon the work of Foucault (1972/1977), Fairclough (1992) and Gee (1999), the main authors providing the concepts that will form the theoretical framework for my study.

Secondly, this chapter offers me a space to reflect on and discuss the role of language and discourse in e-learning practices. I exemplify how language and discourse have been approached in education, using examples related specifically to e-learning and also examples within the broader educational field. This discussion helps me to delineate my field of inquiry within e-learning, leading me to identify and introduce

² *Foucauldian discourse analysis* refers to the type of discourse analysis presented in the work of Michel Foucault (1972).

what will be the main object of study in this thesis: the language of the tasks and how these tasks are conducted throughout the courses.

Thirdly, this chapter enables me to refine my research questions. By reflecting upon my discussions in chapter 2 and in the present chapter, I further operationalise my research questions, which were introduced in chapter 1. Hopefully, by providing answers to these new research questions, this thesis will be able to make a specific contribution to the field of e-learning, which is a *discursive perspective on e-learning practices*.

3.2 Discourse and language shaping educational practices

In social research a common understanding of *discourse* derives from the work of Foucault (1969/1972), which contributed hugely to the popularization of the term. *Discourse* is a combination of the rules on the basis of which a particular statement has been made (Foucault, 1972). Hall, following a Foucauldian tradition of discourse, describes *discourse* as the perceived rules and practices that produce meaningful statements and regulate discourses within specific historical periods and social domains (Hall, 2001). These rules are found in the various domains of knowledge in society, such as medicine, psychiatry and economics. For Foucault, discourse provides a language that is a set of statements (conventions) that form a way of talking about these various domains of knowledge within a specific historical time. Foucault's main concern in the study of discourses was to understand how these domains of knowledge are discursively constructed by the creation of rules, concepts and strategies in particular types of discourse.

This Foucauldian perspective perceives discourse as constituted of history, context and conventions. Foucault describes history as "the work expended on material documentation (books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws,

techniques, objects, customs, etc.) that exists, in every time and place, in every society, either in a spontaneous or in a consciously organized form” (Foucault, 1972:7). Discourses are therefore particular ways of using language to think of and talk about things.

Foucault (1972) offers a *social perspective* on discourse. Discourse is not only what we say or write (e.g. the language used), or ‘how’ we say it (e.g. the intonation) but also the history, context and social conventions that make the speaker say or write something instead of saying or writing something else.

In this thesis I draw mostly on the work of Gee (1999) and Fairclough (2003) to work with discourse, which is in line with the Foucauldian way of understanding discourse. Both Gee and Fairclough explicitly draw on Foucault’s work, but offer ways in which to operationalise the concept of discourse to be applied to the study of practice, whereas in Foucault’s work such operationalisation is not available. Gee (1999) for example, differentiates the ways in which to think of discourse: Discourse (with a capital ‘d’) and discourse (with lower case ‘d’). Gee argues that discourses with a big ‘D’ are “language plus ‘other stuff’” (Gee, 1999:26). This *other stuff* means values, beliefs, symbols and actions that, when put together, enable us to recognise a particular type of discourse. Discourses ‘rule in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, at the same time ‘ruling out’ others. With its rules and practices, Discourse regulates the domains of knowledge, thus making every social configuration meaningful. Gee (2005:33) argues that his concept of a big ‘D’ discourse “is meant to cover what others have called Discourse”, and then he references Foucault. In this thesis, when I talk about the discourses of teaching and learning online, I am referring to this higher level way of thinking of discourse, in the terms of Gee’s big ‘D’ discourses.

The collaborative learning discourse, which is central to my thesis and figures in the two case studies I analyse, is an example of a big ‘D’ Discourse. Collaborative learning is a

teaching approach based on research into learning and on principles of socio-constructivism. In this sense collaborative learning can be historically defined and perceived to be appropriate for particular contexts of learning. Therefore collaborative learning is a discourse in the sense that it defines ways of thinking of and talking about e-learning practices. The collaborative learning discourse is a powerful discourse in the e-learning field due to the ways in which it underpins the articulation of practices. It is a discourse that works explicitly, and can be noticed by practitioners and researchers in a variety of occasions in e-learning practices, as I demonstrated in chapter 2.

Gee (1999) contrasts his big 'D' discourse with discourse with lower-case 'd'. To him, lower-case 'd' discourse means the specific ways in which formal aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary are used to enact particular meanings, that is, language-in-use. Little 'd' discourses are stretches of language, like conversations, which he describes as being used 'on-site'. Gee's little 'd'/big 'D' distinction is useful in this thesis because I refer to and look at discourse in both ways, although my focus is on big 'D' discourses. I draw on Gee's concepts of big 'D' and little 'd' discourse mostly for pragmatic reasons. In practice, these levels are not separate, as language and discourse are inseparable (Fairclough, 2003). On this matter of the relationship between language and discourse, Fairclough argues that "any discursive 'event' (i.e. any instance of discourse) is seen as being simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice, and an instance of social practice" (Fairclough, 1992/2000:4). By discursive practice he means the process of text production and interpretation, that is, how discourses (big 'D' ones) are combined.

Furthermore, big 'D' discourses have a cause-and-effect, cyclical nature; they shape the practice but at the same time are shaped by them. Another characteristic of discourses is that they are always institutionalised, because society is institutionalised: government, business, politics, universities, health care, and media communication are all examples

of institutionalised social bodies which have their own practices, and therefore their own discourses. These practices are realised through language-in-use (little 'd' discourses). By studying discourses one is studying the ways people think and act, which are historically defined, and also the ideologies in which their language choices are embedded. The study of discourses is more than the study of written and spoken words; it is the study of the ways in which social relations are enacted.

Little 'd' discourses, however, are instantiated in language. Within the domain of the collaborative learning discourse, for instance, the things the tutor and learners say and write, the ways in which the course activities are designed and conducted, and the ways in which the marks are assigned are all ways in which this collaborative learning discourse is manifested in the practice, through language-in-use. Gee's concept of little 'd' discourses helps to understand these practices.

Furthermore, discourses have a cause-and-effect, cyclical nature; they shape the practice but at the same time are shaped by them. Another characteristic of discourses is that they are always institutionalised, because society is institutionalised: government, business, politics, universities, health care, and media communication are all examples of institutionalised social bodies which have their own practices, and therefore their own discourses. These practices are realised through language in use, so discourses can be identified in language. Foucault, for example, was not concerned with any detailed study of language. Gee (1999), on the other hand, builds on Foucault's work to explore bits of actual language-in-use. Fairclough (2003) also explores language-in-use, and from his work I draw on the concepts of interdiscursivity and intertextuality. By studying both big and little 'd' discourses one is studying the ways people think and act, which are historically defined, and also the ideologies in which their language choices are embedded. The study of discourses is more than the study of written and spoken words; it is the study of the ways in which social relations are enacted.

In the next section I discuss the role of language as practice, and introduce the work of two other authors that have looked at discourse and language in education, Goodfellow and Lea (2007).

3.3 Discourse as language and practice

I have been arguing that when talking about discourse in this thesis, one should think of discourse on a Foucauldian perspective. Foucault, however, did not provide tools for textual analysis in his work. What he did instead was to offer an understanding of the social nature of all discourses, and their relationship with the shaping of social practices, which is a vital concept in this thesis. It is in this way that I claim to use Foucault's perspective on discourse, although I do provide a look at language-in-use in my data analysis. In order to do some textual analysis, I draw on the work of Fairclough (1992/2003) and Gee (1999), who both have this social perspective on discourse, but also have operationalised the use of certain concepts of discourse theory to a more manageable working level with texts.

The ways in which people speak, think and act in higher education contexts have been objects of study by different authors at different points in time in the educational field.

Goodfellow and Lea (2007), for example, take a similar conceptual perspective to the one I describe above. Their overall aim is to provide a critique of how technologies have been used in institutional environments, particularly in higher education, and how they have changed the practices. They look at language-in-use in the context of e-learning practices, in order to identify the discourses that shape higher education practices.

Goodfellow and Lea (2007) present a particular perspective on discourses in the e-learning field. They talk about both the 'taken-for-granted' discourses of e-learning, and

take a critical lens on more popular discourses of e-learning in the university, such as collaborative learning.

Goodfellow discusses the concept of collaboration in e-learning, which he argues “has been the principal motivation behind much of the effort that has gone into the development of teaching approaches that use computer-mediated communication (CMC)” (Goodfellow, 2007:39). To him, the enthusiasm of the early adopters of online collaborative learning was motivated beyond the desire for technical or pedagogical innovation. It was motivated by what they perceived as the arrival of the communication age in the university. Goodfellow points to the accompanying discourses of online collaborative learning, which he describes to be not only discourses on pedagogical effectiveness but also discourses on transformation and democratization of higher education. Goodfellow’s perspective to discourse is that it is constituted of language *plus* contexts and conventions, and this perspective is in line with the one I use in this study. Still looking at discourses, Lea (2007) problematises the relationship between the traditional disciplinary focus of teaching and learning in higher education with the growing demands of the twenty-first century, namely a focus on professional curriculum, lifelong learning and new media practices. To her, these are discourses that are shaping current practices in higher education towards a focus on the needs of the employers, rather than a focus on the epistemological dimensions of engagement with disciplinary knowledge. She questions the technological agendas, policies and practices that e-learning seems to foster in higher education towards a closer alignment of university practices with professional and vocational fields of study. She argues that the increasing use of mobile technologies and new media in e-learning takes place without a careful consideration of the impact of such practices onto the disciplinary tradition of higher education.

Goodfellow and Lea (2007) analyse different ranges of data, from online classroom interactions to policy documents, in order to identify the discourses they critique. In their type of analysis, both big 'D' and little 'd' types of discourse are analysed and, in fact, they do not make a distinction in such way. They do emphasise, however, that their analytical approach operates at both a micro and macro levels, the micro level being some detail of texts, and the macro level a broader critical approach. In this thesis I propose to apply a perspective on discourse based on Gee, Fairclough and Foucault in order to look at the ways in which discourse constructs practice.

I will now introduce the concepts of interdiscursivity, intertextuality and voice, which help me to analyse my data in chapters 5 and 6.

3.3.1 Interdiscursivity

As previously argued, discourses are constructed in language, history and context, which is to say, in the social sphere. A certain discourse therefore makes sense within a certain social context and a certain historical moment. As a consequence, discourses have boundaries: this is what makes it possible to differentiate between them. However, these boundaries are not rigid: discourses are mobile, flexible, instantiated differently in different contexts, and always in transformation (Hollway, 2001). They usually blend together and create new discourses, in new contexts. A given discourse is constituted by a combination of many other discourses: there is no 'pure discourse'.

Discourses co-exist and create a field of knowledge and practices. This idea of discourses co-existing and interoperating is termed 'interdiscursivity', and this is a significant feature in my data, which I explore by indicating how the discourses in e-learning are constantly drawing upon other discourses and evolving. However, although discourses co-exist, it does not mean that particular characteristics of the discourses that co-exist

cannot be identified. In fact, the dominating characteristics of some of these discourses may be evident through the language-in-use, although slightly nuanced in the context in which these discourses work. In my data analysis I explore this further when I show how these discourses appear in the e-learning practice (see chapters 5 and 6).

In e-learning there are certain practices that are constitutive of a number of discourses that are usually taken for granted. These practices are incorporated through time into the daily activities of course designers, tutors and students, and start to shape the ways in which teaching and learning online is usually carried out.

For example, what are the characteristics of e-learning that makes it a distinctive type of educational mode? I would argue that the answer lies in the interdiscursivity of the discourses that constitute e-learning practices. In discourse theory the particular ways in which discourses interoperate within a particular domain of knowledge is termed the *order of discourse*. For example, the collaborative learning discourse operates in a very explicit way in e-learning practices, whereas the didactic and the institutional discourses may be less visible because they are taken as common sense. The institutional discourse, for example, may be less visible because it is present whenever learning takes place in a formal context. This common sense aspect of these two discourses has implications as to the ways in which the practices are shaped in the ways they are. If these other two discourses were always as explicit as the collaborative learning one, for example, the practices would most likely be slightly different from what they are. The ways in which different discourses interoperate would be another, resulting in practices with different characteristics. The institutional discourse, for example, is most closely linked to the Foucauldian concept of power. It is only by looking at the institutional documents and practices that it is possible to understand how power operates through the institutional discourse. By using a discursive perspective to understand how the institutional calendar, for example, dictates the length of the course activities (and therefore the

amount of time dedicated to learn a given subject), and how the learner needs to achieve a pass mark to succeed in the course, one is looking at the teaching and learning process beyond pedagogical and practical aspects, but at the factors that may prompt particular behaviours, actions and rules, that is, the discourses themselves. Looking at the pedagogical aspects of a course under a discursive perspective is something I do in the analysis chapters of this thesis.

New discourses have come into play in education in the past decade, and existing discourses have started to interoperate in brand new ways. The focus on group work, group cognition, and the importance of learning collaboratively in order for students to learn more than they would by themselves are examples of the new ways of thinking. In e-learning the collaborative learning discourse figures in a very strong and explicit way, as shown in my data analysis chapters, but is not by any means the only factor that shapes the practices. The didactic and the institutional discourses interoperate with the collaborative learning discourse, thus shaping the practices.

Fairclough (1989) refers to the concepts of *types of discourse*. The types of discourse in e-learning are, for example: *collaborative learning*; *the tutor as a facilitator*, the *didactic* and *institutional* discourses (although less explicit). The notion of the 'tutor as a facilitator', for example, can be seen as a discourse. I choose to treat it as a characteristic of the collaborative learning discourse, but it could also be treated as a discourse *per se*, which interacts with the collaborative learning discourse in an *interdiscursive* relationship. That is why I mentioned that the three discourses I focus on this thesis are some but not all the discourses that could be found in the e-learning practices. All discourses relate to each other and often co-exist, although they can be in tension with each other. Therefore I would argue it is more important to concentrate on the characteristics of certain discourses that can be found in the literature, practices and research data (based on the understanding that these discourses are populated by many

others) than to identify every discourse in a domain of practice. There is no 'right' or 'wrong', and nor is there a recipe for identifying discourses and differentiating between them, because they constantly overlap. What counts in discourse analysis is the perspective taken by the researcher and the argumentation used in the construction of the narrative. In discourse analysis, different perspectives on discourse could still lead to similar conclusions, given the interdiscursive nature of all discourses.

3.3.2 Intertextuality and voice

The concept of *voice* comes from a notion of language shaped by conventions associated with different genres, professions and generations, among other factors (Maybin, 2001:67). This view of language, according to Maybin, has profound implications for how we understand the nature of spoken and written texts, as well as the way in which people communicate and the concept of 'individual voice'. Bakhtin's (1981) perspective is that language is not neutral and that a given voice is dialogically constituted, that is, it responds to other voices and aims to address a particular audience.

Voices are therefore 'overpopulated with other people's voices, and the social practices and contexts they invoke' (Maybin, 2001:67). In this sense Maybin argues that 'every time we use language at all we are speaking with the voices of others' (Maybin, 2001:68). The notion of voices questions the existence of a unitary author or a unitary text and focuses on those parts of other people's languages that are borrowed and transformed to make their own utterances (Scollon, Tsang, Yung and Jones, 2004). Invoking a voice, then, also involves invoking the point of view of someone, which might be used by the speaker as a rhetorical resource to support their own purposes (Maybin, 2001).

The other work that invoking voices in texts does is to establish a subject position to the speaker. These voices can be clearly reported voices or taken on as if they were the author's own. They establish subject positions to the extent that they invoke particular meanings that create a sense of identity to the speaker. These meanings are loaded with ideologies and are socio-historically located. Voices are appropriated by the speaker, and might come up in a text as a style or a genre, for example. This is a Bakhtinian approach to voices in a text, and it allows the understanding of voices in two senses: "in the macro sense as echoes of larger constructs of power/knowledge and social practice, and in the more conventional sense of particular voices from particular texts recognizable by such features as the words and the phrases they use and how these are textualised" (Scollon, Tsang, Li, Yung and Jones, 2004:176).

Fairclough (2000) distinguishes between these two levels of intertextuality. He calls the explicit appropriation of other's actual words manifest intertextuality and the appropriation of broader aspects of other's discourse in terms of genre, style and ideological positioning constitutive intertextuality or interdiscursivity. He argues:

"Intertextuality is basically the property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict, ironically echo, and so forth."

(Fairclough, 2000:84)

The concept of intertextuality places the texts in a historical perspective, as transforming the past, and helps the researcher to identify the voices in the text. It brings existing conventions and prior texts into the present. Scollon, Tsang, Li, Yung and Jones (2004:181) summarize the relationship between voices and intertextuality in a simple way: 'all texts are intertextual and they contain a variety of voices which link up to other voices outside of themselves'.

Identifying voices in a text requires the understanding of texts not as self-contained structures but as historically-located constructions (Frow, 1995). Frow states that there are traces of otherness in texts, which are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. The representation of these structures can be explicitly marked in the text or implicitly embedded in the linguistic construction. Frow argues that texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms, out of conventions of genre, out of styles embedded in language and out of other texts.

Fairclough (2003) refers to the external and internal relations of a text. Analysis of the external relations of a text is an analysis of its relations with other elements of social practices and discourses. Intertextuality is one of these relations, offering a way of understanding and analysing how elements of other texts are incorporated into the text under analysis. Since these other texts may be 'other people's texts' it also means analysing the voices of others that are incorporated in them. The internal relations of a text include analysis of semantic and grammatical relations and lexical (vocabulary) and phonological relations. In this thesis I deal mostly with the external relations, drawing on the internal relations as a way to support the intertextual analysis, such as the semantic, grammatical and lexical aspects of the texts. In this sense, I am specifically looking for words and expressions that might help me locate the discourse types in the teaching practice, drawing on Gee's (1999) concept of little 'd' discourses, in order to understand more about the three big 'D' discourses I identified, collaborative learning, didactic and institutional discourses. The internal relations of a text are *internal* because they are at the level of text production through language (linguistic structures); but at the same time they are related to the external relations of a text, because the language used evokes different discourses.

The main distinction between *intertextuality* and *interdiscursivity* is that the concept of interdiscursivity is broader than that of intertextuality. In intertextuality there is the

appropriation of other people's texts by the speaker, while in interdiscursivity, besides the appropriation of texts, there is the appropriation of broad discourse types (Scollon, Tsang, Li, Yung and Jones 2004). The concept of interdiscursivity is very important in this thesis as it focuses on how discourses interrelate with one another, and I will be looking at this relation between the three discourses identified (chapters 5-8).

Scollon et al. suggest that tracing interdiscursivity might be a complex task because the analyst would be looking for 'conventional'-packages of wordings formats, styles and the like. They claim that the various discursive frames drawn on in producing a text may themselves involve contradictory sets of generic and stylistic conventions, and conventions of voice appropriation that must be negotiated by the speakers (Scollon, Tsang, Li, Yung and Jones, 2004:188-189). This is what happens when analysing the practices of e-learning in the two case-studies of this thesis. The appropriation of voices and of different discourses by the course tutor is regulated by the conventions of the field. In this case, these 'packages' of wordings and styles that Scollon et al. mention above are investigated in the language used.

In my data I identify three types of voices in the language of the tasks: the voice of the teacher (the one who teaches, the one who traditionally has the knowledge to pass onto the students); the voice of facilitator (the one who also has the knowledge but whose main role is to help the learner to construct their own knowledge, by providing support and guidance in the learning process) and the voice the 'course-author' (the one who often represents the institutionalisation of the learning practices because he/she acts according to academic rules and conventions). The analysis of voices is based upon the analysis of little 'd' discourses, that is, some aspects of language-in-use.

The tutor therefore can assume different roles through the voices he or she draws upon in the language of the tasks. By 'roles' I mean *social roles*, such as facilitator, teacher and course author. It is by drawing on different voices that the tutor usually assumes these

different roles. However, although I identify different voices and discourses in my data it does not mean that they exist in separate compartments: on the contrary, these various discourses and voices are fluid and overlapping as previously mentioned, but I have to name them in order to see them working and to have an analytical tool with which to unpack the language use in order to understand the social practices.

Overall, interdiscursivity helps me to explain why in a certain discourse in practice there are traces of others discourses. It gives me the conceptual understanding to explain these instances. It was common in the e-learning literature discussed in chapter 2, for example, to find that even in courses based on collaborative learning, part of the assessment of learning was done individually, by looking at the amount of messages each learner had posted in the discussion forum. This was an indicator of individual course participation and an overall benchmark of success for the course. This view of assessment embeds both the institutional discourse, with the view that a high level of messages in the course represents its success, and the didactic discourse, with the understanding that learners need to be assessed individually as learning is an individual process. In this example, three discourses operate together, albeit implicitly, in situations recognized as being based on collaborative learning. In my data analysis in chapters, 5 and 6 I attempt to identify the interdiscursivity of the data and the different voices involved in creating specific e-learning practices.

3.3.3 The didactic and the institutional discourses in e-learning practices

In the literature I have presented so far, a lot has been said about the scenario in which collaborative learning emerged and what it reacted against. It has also been stated that collaborative learning grew in popularity in higher education as online distance education started to gain attention amongst universities. By looking carefully at the

literature review, the contexts and my data I could identify two other discourses interplaying with it: *the didactic discourse* and *the institutional discourse*.

The didactic and the institutional discourses in e-learning teaching practices tend not to be as evident as the collaborative one, but I nevertheless propose that they are indeed present. The didactic discourse, I argue, relates to the traditional model of education: the transmission model or acquisition model (Freire, 1970/1985). It is constituted of all the teaching and learning practices that traditionally have been part of the teaching and learning process: a teacher who teaches, a student who learns, pre-defined course content, and assignments to check the students' learning progress. Alongside the didactic discourse there is the institutional discourse. This is constituted of all academic rules and conventions that are part of a university context; such as exams and marks (evaluation); the academic calendar (which defines the timescale of learning); the role of the tutor as an employee bounded to organizational rules and conventions; the role that a university has in relation to the wider society, to cite a few. The institutional discourse has to do with rules, conventions, systems of evaluation, regulation and orders of discourse. In this sense the institutional discourse is related to the Foucauldian approach to discourse, which holds the notion that discourses are made of rules and conventions. The institutional discourse is the discourse that most clearly let us find these rules and systems through conventional academic practices.

I am not suggesting, however, that one discourse is better than the other (e.g. the collaborative and the didactic), but that they are implicated in practices that may be at a times controversial. That is why they are different, but not necessarily 'good' or 'bad', 'better' or 'worse'. The didactic discourse, for example, in relation to the collaborative learning discourse, may be appropriate in some instances. Collaborative learning however, offers something different (e.g. the focus on learning with or through others), but it is not necessarily better than learning in a didactic way. The

institutional discourse co-exists with these discourses all the time, no matter what learning approach is chosen. The didactic and collaborative learning discourses themselves, although essentially different, can often co-exist too, as my data will show later in this thesis. Apart from these three discourses (didactic, collaborative learning and institutional), there are still other discourses interplaying with them, but for the purpose of this thesis, I limit my discussion to these three.

The collaborative learning discourse, overall, can be found in and linked to research looking into how learners learn and in particular how they learn in social contexts, as I have shown in chapter 2. Similarly, the didactic discourse can be traced back to earlier work looking at and trying to understand how learners learn. The institutional discourse, however, is inherently present if learning occurs in a formal context. In this thesis, the three discourses I focus on have been identified within this perspective, and through my own data. The collaborative learning discourse and the didactic discourse have been identified from existing research, that is, from the literature review I presented in chapter 2, and also from my own data. The institutional discourse, in turn, has been identified from the sites which I researched; through their practices and analysis of the institutional documents (e.g. Unis@Digital case study, chapter 5). In the beginning of my research I wanted to focus on the discourses that were most influencing the academic practices in e-learning, and the collaborative learning discourse was the most evident one for me, because I, as a tutor and a distance learner myself, had experienced many learning activities that were based upon the collaborative learning approach (see chapter 1). What I wanted to understand, however, was 'why' things were not always succeeding as well as they were supposed to in the courses I had experienced, according to the premises of the collaborative learning approach. That is when I started this research and noticed, through my literature review and my data that the didactic and institutional discourses were

interplaying with the collaborative learning discourse, and therefore, creating tensions. Other discourses could have been identified (e.g. technology discourse), but I chose to focus on these three (collaborative learning, didactic and institutional) because they respond to each other, almost in an antagonistic way, but at the same time they inevitably co-exist, and are at the heart of the pedagogical practices in e-learning. I will describe my data analysis process in more detail in chapter 4. Below I explain where I found the evidence for these three discourses in my literature review and in my data.

The didactic discourse can be found, for example, in the literature of chapter 2, in the discussion of *the social turn*. A characteristic of the didactic approach to teaching is a focus on the individual learner and their strengths and limitations, whereas a characteristic of the collaborative learning approach is a focus on the achievements made possible through learning with others. This was what the social turn was about, a push away from the focus on the individual to a focus on the collective. The didactic discourse can also be found in the interaction of the tutor with the learner, when the tutor (taking up the voice of a teacher) for example teaches individually the learners that are falling behind the course, as the SmartWeb example in chapter two shows. The didactic discourse is also embedded in the ways in which the e-learning courses are conducted, in which very often, as demonstrated with Oliver's (2001:30) example, the tutor has the power to designate marks and to control the flow of the activities.

The institutional discourse, in turn, can be found in all education practices that are regulated by the institution. For example, the institutional discourse appears in Lea's (2007) argument that e-learning seems to foster technological agendas and policies in higher education which are closely aligned with the needs of employers and as a result, higher education has been lacking a focus on epistemological knowledge. The institutional discourse is also found in the evaluation practices and in the

understanding that a good level of student participation in the course is an indicator of success. Key to the institutional discourse, however, is the role of assessment. Formal courses are accredited through students doing assessments and receiving a mark. It is also about the broader validation of higher education as a profession. All courses are validated through internal procedures and many also align to particular professional bodies and what they perceive as relevant for that subject.

Here is a summary of the main characteristics of each of these discourses:

- **The collaborative learning discourse**

A discourse that emphasises group tasks and course participation. It both motivates learners to interact with other peer learners and to post their individual contributions in the discussion forum, as for other learners to read and comment. In this discourse, learning is understood to be better when it occurs in a collaborative situation. This discourse is highly influenced by the 'social turn' and the focus on the collective, and also by Vygotsky's concept of *zone of proximal development*. From this concept, when thought of in terms of the adult learner, it is understood that learners achieve better performance in group situations, when the input from other learners may push forward the thinking process of the individual student. The tutor is perceived as a facilitator, and should not 'teach', but only guide the students. In the analysis chapters of this thesis, the term *tutor* will be substituted by *facilitator* when I want to signal the collaborative learning discourse.

- **The didactic discourse**

The didactic discourse has its roots in a traditional way of teaching, in which tutors are supposed to teach and to test students learning individually. The tutor is seen as a

figure of authority and is the holder of knowledge. The tutor is referred to as *teacher* in the analysis chapters of this thesis, when I want to signal the didactic discourse in the practices. In the didactic discourse there is great emphasis on a highly focused set of objectives, described as learning competencies (Mayes and de Freitas, 2005). The way to achieve these objectives is by the completion of learning tasks and assignments, which are in turn marked against those objectives. If a learner proves they have learned the subject taught by the tutor (who takes up the voice of a teacher), they are granted high marks in return. This type of didactic discourse is considered traditional because it has been the model of education for many centuries. A collaborative learning approach in contrast, based on constructivist principles, builds on learner's prior knowledge and does not necessarily have such tightly defined notions of what is to be learnt in advance. The learner therefore brings something significant to the learning process. In both discourses (didactic and collaborative) however, a low performance in a test results in a low mark, and implies that the learner will either have to resit the examination and 'do well' or they will fail in the achievement of a formal course recognition (e.g. a certificate, a degree etc). This condition of 'no pass mark equals no certificate' is one example of where these two discourses overlap, and this is partly due to the institutional discourse, which is inherently embedded in formal learning situations, independently of the teaching approach in use. The institutional discourse is discussed below.

- **The institutional discourse**

A discourse that involves academic rules and conventions: exams, academic calendar, certificates and grades. In this discourse it is possible to find elements of both the didactic and the collaborative learning discourses. For example, the emphasis on marks and grades of the didactic discourse is repeated here, because it represents the

institutionalisation of teaching and learning practices. Similarly, the emphasis on course participation is present here because a high level of participation in the course (e.g. a high number of messages posted in the discussion forum) is understood as course success. This discourse is usually represented in the voice of the course-author but can also be perceived in occasions in the teacher and facilitator voices.

Moreover, the institutional discourse has a specific connection with the Foucauldian approach when it comes to *power relations*. Fairclough (2000), drawing on Foucault's notion of power, argues that particular ways of using language and the relations of power which underlie them are often unclear to people, and discourse analysis aims to make more visible these opaque aspects of discourse. *Power* is a concept that is spread across all social levels, among all individuals. Relations of power happen between individuals, as for example the relationships between the student and the tutor, the university and the tutor, and the university and the society. In the case of this thesis, which is based on two educational settings, the power relations happen mostly on the interactions between the students and tutors and tutors and the university. These power relations are usually prompted by the ways in which the course is designed, the assessment plan, the institutional policy and calendar, and the general rules of engagement between the participants in those contexts. My intention is to look at the institutional discourse in relation to this power perspective. This perspective will hopefully help me understand how the power relations in these case studies take place, and observe how the interplay of discourses enable different power relations between the subjects, according to the social roles they are playing (tutor, student, course-author etc.). Most importantly perhaps is that, as discourses overlap, there is tension between them.

The notion that *where there is power, there is resistance* (Foucault, 1979) should not be taken for granted when discussing power relations. For example, my data shows that it

was common practice to ask students to take part in discussion forums, by posting messages and replying to the messages of their peer colleagues. Some students like such a way of interacting with others and do indeed read all or most of the discussion forum messages, as well as post their own, both generating new content or simply creating 'bond' with other students by acknowledging their opinions. Nonetheless, to some students taking part in discussion forums can be daunting, boring, useless or excessively time-consuming. Students do have different perceptions, and when participation in the discussion forum is not compulsory in a course they may resist to taking part in it, no matter how much the tutor encourages them to participate. On the other hand, when participation in a discussion forum is compulsory in a course, the students who dislike such activity will usually do the very bare minimum to get their marks, if at all. This is again a type of resistance, against the system, against the university pedagogy. This is just a very simplistic example and obviously does not encapsulate all the possible reasons why some students would rather not to engage in discussion forums (see chapter 2, p. 38-39), but it is one of the possible scenarios. There are innumerable ways in which resistance can take place in education, sometimes happening in a very strong way, other times in a subtle way. In this thesis, however, I will not focus on resistance, mostly because I do not analyse the data generated from the students. It would mean another whole dimension for this thesis and would take me away from my main purpose, which is to work with the discourses identified in this study. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to introduce this discussion, otherwise there could be an understanding that power relations happen always in a top bottom direction. Foucault (1996) claims that power should be something analysed as something that circulates, that is, as something that only works as a network. It is never placed here and there and it is never in the hands of a few. Individuals are always in a position to use power over someone or to be subject to power. For Foucault, individuals are always at the centre of

power transmission. In other words, “power is not used over individuals but it rather passes through them” (Foucault, 1996:183). This is a view of power as networked, which to a certain extent can be found in e-learning practices, as I will discuss below through the work of Land and Bayne (2004). They argue:

“The framework for our discussion is provided largely by Foucault, and it is his perspective which perhaps most usefully indicates our approach [...]. Disciplinary power is not only manifested in the workings of penal institutions. For Foucault it is identified with the power-knowledge nexus which is inherent in the workings of institutions throughout the social sphere, including educational institutions. It is important to note, however, that power is not, for Foucault, simply a matter of repression or domination, the property of a particular individual, or group, or class. Rather it is a constituent element of contemporary society - it circulates throughout social relations like an energy. [...] Computerised student tracking systems like the ones described above³ do appear to represent the perfect disciplinary apparatus, the single gaze that constantly observes everything.”

(Land and Bayne, 2004:5-6)

Land and Bayne (2004) claim that the student tracking mechanism of virtual learning environments works as a surveillance tool. Tutors and course designers can see, for instance, the frequency with which the students access the learning environment, or which pages were visited. This is a feature that is usually put in place by the institution, and is one way in which the institutional discourse operates. Higher education institutions (such as Unis@Digital and Syracuse) seem to find benefit in tracking the number of times the students log in to a course, in order to rate their participation⁴ in the course (quantitatively). The learners, on the other hand, start themselves to monitor the frequency in which they log in, and this is when power start to become networked. This shows that this concept of power and surveillance that Foucault (1970) describes seems to be applicable also in e-learning situations. My data shows how power and

³ Here Land and Bayne refer to the tracking systems of students in virtual learning environments such as WebCT and Blackboard, which they mention in their paper.

⁴ The term ‘participation’ is further discussed in chapter 5, p. 156.

surveillance take place in both Unis@Digital and Syracuse case studies. The tracking mechanism works as a learning management system, helping the institution to administrate the students' registration, participation, marks etc. In chapter 6 I will show how the tracking mechanism and the institutional discourse take place in my data.

Next, having given an overall description of the main characteristics of the discourses I deal with in this thesis, I shall look at how discourse has been treated in some existing works.

3.4 Discourse-theoretic approaches in collaborative learning research

I now present some examples of how the study of educational practices has been approached within the perspective of discourses. Not all examples fit entirely as discourse-analytical studies, but they share a similar conceptual background to the ones advocated by discourse theory developed by Gee (1999), Fairclough (2003) and Foucault's (1970), in which there is a socio-perspective of how language and discourse construct practices.

For example, the particular uses of language in specific academic contexts have been addressed in slightly different ways, but still within a similar understanding of the role of language and discourse in education, by authors such as Schrage (1990), Bruffee (1993) and Scardamelia and Bereiter (2006). Although they do not share the same academic orientations, they seem to have similar perspectives on the roles of language and discourse shaping practices in the educational field.

Schrage (1990) discusses the importance of collaboration in organizational settings. He looks at the role of language in relation to the use of collaborative tools and technologies. His main argument is that language shapes thought. He argues that even though the importance of communication within organizations is treated as a given,

there is very little attention paid to the role of language in organizations. He claims that language must be viewed as a medium to create meaning and shared understanding, and not simply as a way to exchange information (Schrage, 1990). To him, language is a tool for collaboration, which by means of conversations determines what will and will not get done. Language, therefore, has the power to shape practices. Although his argument is mostly built in relation to collaborating in organizations, the same principle applies to the e-learning field within higher education, since universities are also organizations.

Schrage's (1990) claims about 'language shaping thought'; 'language shaping practices' and 'language as a medium to shared understandings' all seem to be in line with a socio-perspective of the role of language and discourse in education. Schrage focuses on discussing the role of language in collaborative situations, and in his work he proposes that the linguistic aspects of language in these settings shape how people interpret what they see. His point was that "a new approach to language can lead to a better quality of communication and collaboration" (1990:79). He argues that it is not about the creation of a 'new language' but about making people a little more conscious of the language they already use; and as a result that language use can be more effective.

The role of language in shaping educational practices has also been discussed by Bruffee (1993). He presents a point of view in terms of the role of language in learning. He discusses collaborative learning in higher education and the role of the authority of knowledge. To him, everybody in a knowledge community "speaks the same language" (1993:130). He uses the term "normal discourse of the community" (1993:130), when referring to what seems like *jargon* to non-members of a given community. Although Bruffee does not seem to be drawing on the concept of discourse in the same way as I am in this thesis, in my perspective, this type of language, one that constitutes the language of a community, is indeed a type of discourse. It is the big 'D' discourse in practice, in

which discourse provides a language, a set of statements and conventions with which to talk about something.

In Gee's terms, the language of the community can be compared, to a certain degree, to what he calls 'social language'. A social language is "what we learn and what we speak" (Gee, 1999:37). It is a type of language that fits particular social contexts and has its own *rules* by which participants can identify themselves and their interlocutors (Gee, 1999). For example, a tutor may address their pupils in a more formal way, avoiding the use of slangs and using instead word choices that are compatible with an academic environment. When the same tutor is with their friends, the language they use, that is, the linguistic choices made in their speech, may not be the same. They may be less formal, for example, and use typical word choices of people who have a more intimate type of social relationship. These particular ways of speaking in different contexts, which are taken for granted, help when positioning ourselves within a certain community; and this is what Gee calls a social language, based on the concept of the little 'd' discourse. There are many types of social languages, he argues, and we make use of them depending on the environment and context in which we find ourselves.

Bruffee (1993) also provides a perspective on both the language and discourse. One of his arguments is that the authority of university tutors comes from the fact that because tutors are *fluent* in the language of their communities they therefore are acknowledged representatives of those communities. Within this point of view, Bruffee is arguing that what learners are aspiring to do by joining higher education is to become members of those communities of knowledge by learning how to 'speak their languages', that is, by learning their *discourses*.

This idea of learning the discourse of a community has been taken further, with the concept that learners should not only *learn the discourse* but also *create the discourse*.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) challenge the conception that discourse "is primarily a

way of sharing knowledge and subjecting ideas to criticism [...]” (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 2006:102). They argue that this has been a scientific way of understanding discourse for the past fifty years. Instead, they propose a view in which discourse is where the public knowledge in a community exists. In other words, knowledge is *in the discourse*; and not something in the minds of individual members of the community. This is a significant idea in the exploration of how knowledge is constructed and advanced in society.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) come from the premise that substantial creative knowledge can take place in classrooms (including virtual classrooms); and that this knowledge has the potential to advance the state of knowledge within the larger society. In their view, substantial knowledge in schools should not only come from the work of mature scholars, but also from the work of the learners in the classroom, who can generate ideas and concepts that can contribute in the further advancement of societal knowledge. In this sense, what lacks in school education, they argue, is the thought of *knowledge creating knowledge*. This perspective on academic learning seems to empower learners to not only learn what is accepted as legitimized knowledge, but also to search further afield for connections and perspectives that can enhance what is already known. This is what they describe as the *knowledge building discourse*, a discourse that happens in the classroom (or in organisations) by the process of “ideas, interacting with ideas to generate new ideas” (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 2006:104).

This type of *knowledge building* discourse can only happen in an environment that supports the linking of participants’ generated contributions as an emergent hypertext that represents the collective, rather than the ideas of individual participants, they argue. Hence, they propose that e-learning practices can be enhanced by the use of specific technology for such purposes.

Scardamalia and Bereiter initially developed a piece of educational software called

Computer Supported Intentional Learning Environments (CSILE), which later they improved and called Knowledge Forum. This software has the capability to help shape discourse, by means of preserving ideas in the learning environment that can be subsequently accessed, they argue. It contrasts with traditional threaded discussion forum environments, in which learners' contributions are displayed on a chronological way in the threads, without the possibility of linking relevant ideas from other threads. Furthermore, in traditional threaded discussion forums, as the number of messages grow, very often forum monitors need to erase threads of a certain age, whereas in Knowledge Forum these are considered important for the overall line of argument that can potentially lead to knowledge advancement, within the conception of a knowledge building discourse.

The knowledge-building discourse requires specific points of action, Scardamalia and Bereiter argue. Learners need to be involved in a set of commitments that would allow for this type of classroom discourse to be effective and have the potential to contribute to knowledge advancement: a commitment to progress (discussions devoted to sharing information and venting opinions); a commitment to seeking common understanding and a commitment to expanding the base of accepted facts. In this perspective the knowledge building discourse presents a set of rules, which define the types of conversations and interactions that are legitimized by the participants of a given group of people interested in a particular domain of knowledge.

In a simplistic way, the knowledge building discourse is about accepted practices that come into existence through particular forms of language-in-use through technology. Scardamalia and Bereiter focus on the conventions of the community, that is, the commonsense ways of doing things within a given community of practice. Learners need to agree on the rules, discuss, and accept or reject the ideas that will eventually lead (or not) to new knowledge. In this sense, the knowledge building discourse is built within a

set of commonsensical rules that will define it, I would suggest. This is, in discourse theory, one of the characteristics of discourse: they 'rule in' what can be said and 'rule out' what cannot be said.

In my view, the knowledge building discourse proposed by Scardamalia and Bereiter, seems to be extremely powerful to motivate learners to take accountability for their learning and also to be motivated by the fact they can make visual connections between ideas and are able to access them at any time. This can potentially help learners to understand that the compartmentalized way in which various disciplines are taught to them is purely for pragmatic reasons, and that these disciplines are actually interconnected and form a unique body of knowledge. This perception makes learning an unlimited ongoing process. Nevertheless, the knowledge building discourse itself interplays with other discourses, which are constituent of institutionalised learning situations. This 'interplay of discourses' is a perspective advocated by discourse theory, and I will discuss it further below in this chapter. This perspective will hopefully help me to explore the reasons why e-learning may present implicit contradictions and therefore lead to practices that are rather complex to understand.

From the work of Schrage (1990), Bruffee (1993) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) that I presented here it is possible to learn that language has a crucial role in facilitating the learning process. Language helps construct the particular ways in which people communicate and collaborate within a given domain of practice. The work of Schrage, Bruffee and Scardamalia and Bereiter focused on language mostly from the student perspective, that is, how students communicate and collaborate through language. Although language plays an essential role in their argument, it does not seem to be their intention to look at it on a semantic level. Nevertheless, all of them discussed discourse and e-learning and/or languages as discourse in collaborative learning practices. Their perspectives are slightly different, as is to be expected, and so are their approaches to

discourse and language. What they have in common, however, is that they approach discourse in e-learning as social practice. Their common interest in discourse in e-learning and/or language in the collaborative approach, despite their diverse backgrounds, serves as a reminder, I would argue, of the innate interdisciplinary of e-learning as a field of study and practice.

3.5 The contradictions between theory and practice

In order to provide a final thought on this discussion of the role of language and discourse in e-learning practices, I shall point to the overall conceptual connection of the studies addressed in this chapter. This conceptual connection adds to my thinking of how to explore in this thesis the potential of a discursive perspective on e-learning practices. It was not my intention and it would not be possible anyway, to exhaust the universe of studies in language and discourse in the educational field in this thesis; and the examples I provided by no means attempt to do so. Nevertheless, for the scope of this study, the literature I reviewed provides a taste of the kinds of things that have been argued in relation to language and discourse within the socio-perspective of discourse that I propose. Language and discourse seem to be at the core of the shaping of educational practices.

Within the premise that language and discourse are inseparable (Fairclough, 2003), all the authors look at discourse and language in different but congruent ways. Lea (2007) presents a broad perspective on discourse, in which she looks at the effects of discourses in e-learning practices in higher education, on a big 'D' perspective on discourse. Both Schrage (1990) and Goodfellow (2007) look at collaborative learning. Schrage focuses on the importance of language shaping thought in collaborative tasks, which is a perspective that is in line with Scardamalia and Bereiter's (2006) work based

on the concept of the *knowledge building discourse*. Goodfellow (2007) discusses collaborative learning also with a focus on the social, by arguing that the optimization of e-learning practices no longer depends upon cognitive theories or approaches to teaching such as the collaborative approach, but on the recognition that e-learning technologies are now usual sites of academic practice. I am drawing on these examples in order to try and demonstrate the universe of things that can be studied using discourse and language as object of analysis in education. Schrage and Goodfellow both focus on collaborative learning (in face-to-face and e-learning situations), arguing that discourse has the power to shape practices. Bruffee (1993) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) also discuss collaborative learning, however their focus is on 'the language of the community', that is, the discourses that a community constructs and that, at the same time, constructs the community. This is also a specific look at discourse, where a focus on language-in-use is prevalent. The ways these studies are constructed and the various foci given are different. Nevertheless, the conceptual agreement of these scholars is that language and discourse are social, and both of them construct educational practices. This conceptual convergence is also in line with the with the discourse theory I present as the analytical framework shaping my analysis in this thesis; the work of Foucault (1970); Fairclough (1989) and Gee (1999). They all have a socio-perspective on language and discourse.

These different perspectives on discourse and language illustrate the interdisciplinary ways in which discourse is used, and that e-learning research is carried out. What I see could be added to the e-learning field is some research into the discourses embedded in the practices, which I personally term 'a discursive perspective' on e-learning practices. Such an approach on discourse in e-learning could potentially help bridging the gap of the current understanding of the mismatch between theory and practice in the field. Also, most e-learning research focus on the analysis of the students' interactions in web

conferences, and a lot of them uses content analysis as a method. Despite the relevance of both the focus and the method, I believe it would be interesting to see more research on the other aspects of a course, particularly the ones that happen outside the conference area, as for example in the language of the tasks. The language of the tasks has real implications as for the ways in which the discourses of teaching and learning online are being constructed. De Laat and Lally (2003), for instance, suggest, that a lot goes on in the tutor's thinking about their practice. This thinking is often externalized in the dialogues the tutor has with the learners when introducing or commenting the tasks. Schrage (1990), Bruffee (1993), Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) and Goodfellow and Lea (2007) all demonstrated, within their own disciplines, the role that language and discourse play in shaping educational practices. The work of DeLaat and Lally (2003) particularly inspired me to look at what the tutor writes to the students in relation to the tasks; communications that do not take place necessarily in the discussion forum of a course but, in other ways, such as in the messages exchanged in general public areas of a learning environment, on the feedbacks on assessment, and most importantly, in the language of the tasks that are usually described in the main content area of a course. The work of Bruffee (1993) and Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) made me reflect on the role of the 'language of the community', and to think of what would be this sort of language in relation to e-learning course design.

Therefore, I believe that looking at how tasks are presented and conducted in e-learning, what sort of language they usually use and what sorts of discourses are involved in the construction of these tasks can potentially be a new perspective in which to think of e-learning practices. This is what I set myself to investigate in this thesis. Having this new perspective in mind, I refine my research questions in the section 3.7 of this chapter.

3.6 Model of discourse and practice in e-learning

What is really challenging in working with discourse analysis, I believe, is that in order to use the concept of the researcher has to employ analysis techniques at a level of granularity that actually fades away in practice. For example, in my view, the work that Fairclough's (2002) does best is to show the relationship between practice and discourse. Discourse and practice are inseparable in the same ways as discourse and language. Thus, three things that are interconnected in discourse theory are: language, discourse and practice. It is important, in my view, to imagine that all those elements are overlapping, at different levels. This is something that is really difficult represent visually, but is perhaps the most appropriate way of thinking about the relationship of all the concepts introduced so far in this thesis. Fairclough (2001:24) presents a table in which he discusses the various concepts of his discourse theory. I build upon his table to construct my own visual representation below.

It is complex to analyse discourse as data. Discourse is abstract and it interrelates to a number of different concepts and discourses at different levels. This is why one of the aspects of this thesis that I wish to emphasise is that the compartmentalization of actual practices belonging to specific types of discourse that I propose in my analysis is purely for a practical analytical purpose. It is the way I found to look into the e-learning practices in more depth. In reality the actual practices blend with the discourses and that is why it is so difficult to understand the complexity of what happens in e-learning.

Below I attempt to visually represent the relationship of the discourse concepts discussed so far in relation to the e-learning field, and indicate how these concepts are perceived in this study.

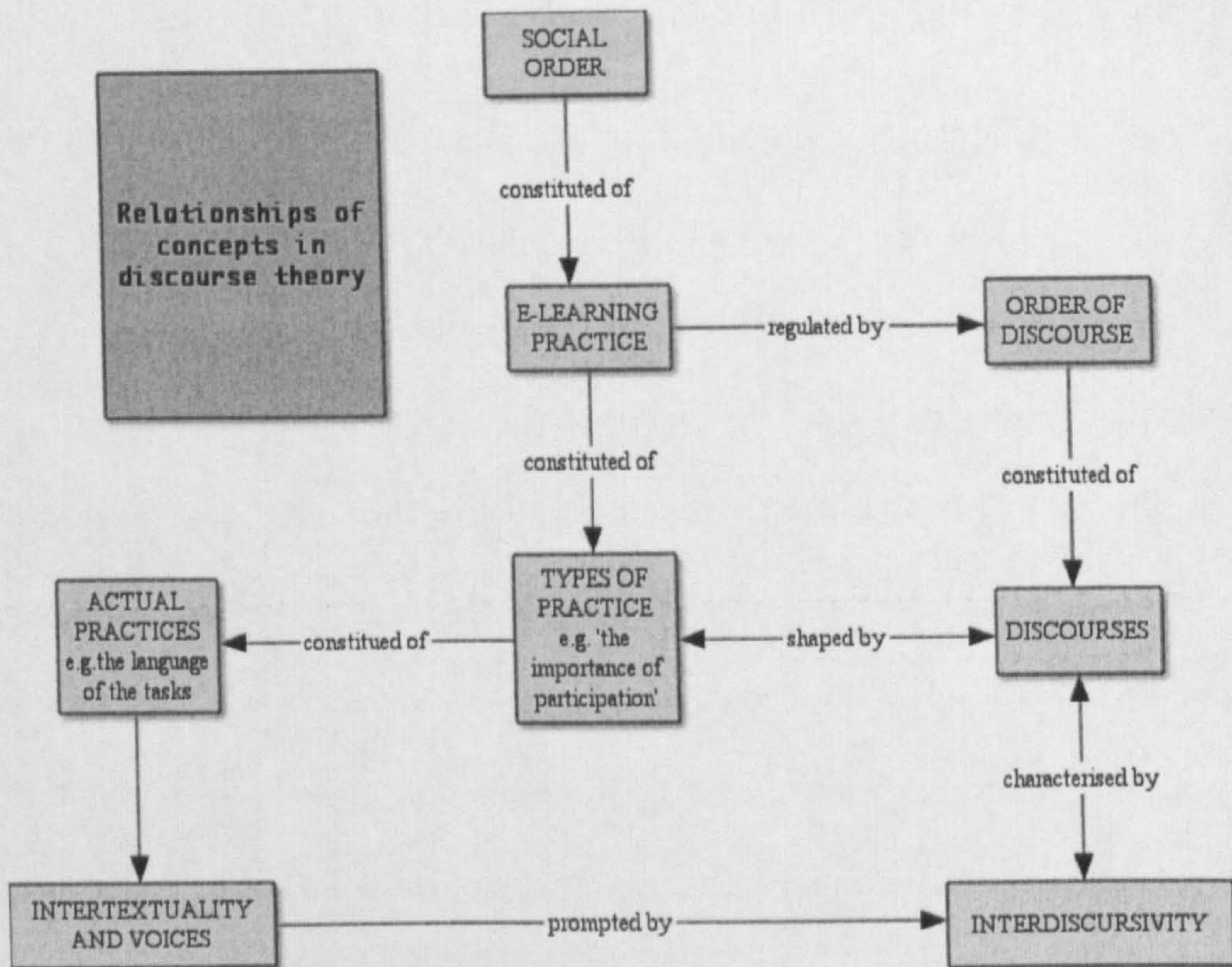


Figure 3.1 - Visual representation of the relationships of concepts in discourse theory

This diagram was inspired by Fairclough's (2001:24) 'social order' table. The social order, for Fairclough, is more general than the order of discourse. We experience the society we live in by being involved with many institutions, which are structured into different spheres of action and situations, each of which has its associated types of practice. Social order refers to the structuring of the social space into domains of practice. In this thesis for example, I carry out two case studies, each of which has its own social order. Distance learning in Brazil, for example, has a specific set of values, a set of practices that are unique to that context and within which the e-learning practices happen. I do not intend to go into detail as to the nature of social order, however, in this context, it means a specific set of values, unique to a given context, that shape the practices as they are. It is a combination of historical elements, context and conventions that together establish the natural order (the usual and accepted ways) in which a domain of practice takes place and evolves. Let me take Brazil as an example. The Brazilian educational system, at the time of my study,

only allowed distance learning to happen in a blended way, with face-to-face exams and up to a certain limit (20%) of the total amount of hours in a taught degree that students could take via this e-learning mode. These conventions are based upon specific historical contexts that were unique to the Brazilian society (some of which are discussed in chapter 5), and constitute, in a simplistic way, the *social order* in that context.

Still using Brazil as an example, at the top the diagram I placed the social order, which in this case would be the Brazilian educational system. This system includes face-to-face education, high school, higher education etc. Constituting this social order is *e-learning practice*. These e-learning practices are regulated by the *order of discourse* in the field of e-learning. This order of discourse is constituted by all the discourses that are part of the e-learning practices, as for example, the didactic discourse, the collaborative learning discourse, the institutional discourse and other discourses that I am not focusing on in this thesis. What makes the social order unique is the specific way in which all these discourses interoperate, characterizing the practices. The social order is therefore the particular way in which *interdiscursivity* takes place in a given context. For example, the dominance of the collaborative learning approach over other forms of teaching online at Unis@Digital (as will be illustrated by case study 1) sets a specific relationship between collaborative learning and the other discourses that constitute the practices. It is this particular way in which these discourses interplay that is the order of discourse. An order of discourse can simplistically be defined as the conventionalised ways of doing things, or the typical ways in which (pedagogical) discourses tended to appear in e-learning in Brazil at the time of my study. Within the order of discourse one can identify various types of discourse interoperating, and likewise, within *e-learning practice* there are many specific practices taking place (eg. assessments, exams, tasks). Each type of practice has its own characteristics. For example, in the practices based on the collaborative approach 'participation' was a very important element. Each type of

practice is constituted by the *actual practices* (the practices in action), such as the language of the tasks, what Gee (1999) would call little 'd' discourse.. Due to the interdiscursivity taking place in these practices there are different voices embedded in them. This is just an attempt to visually represent how discourses shape the practices but at the same time these practices shape the discourses. The arrows I used are sometimes bi-directional, because it is difficult to visually represent all these elements concomitantly influencing one another.

This diagram is an attempt to illustrate the different levels of my analysis, whose main object is on the 'actual practices'. In order to analyse the actual practices of tutors and course authors, within this Foucauldian perspective, I have to understand these practices in this broader discursive perspective, and how they make sense within the social order, the order of discourse etc; and I am drawing on perspectives from Fairclough and Gee to support this Foucauldian perspective.

As a result of the discussions carried out in chapters 2 and 3 so far, on how discourses shape the practices in e-learning, I propose a refinement of the research questions I introduced in chapter 1.

3.7 Refined research questions

By means of the literature review and analysis of the contexts of my study I identified three discourses: the collaborative learning, the didactic and the institutional. The *didactic discourse* for example, was constantly present in my data and represented traditional practices for teaching and learning. The didactic discourse represented the *transmission model*, or *acquisition model* of education, in which the teacher is perceived as the *knowledge holder* and the student the *deposit box* for that knowledge. The didactic discourse could be identified for example in teaching practices that were considered

traditional, such as asking students to answer a question based on what the text book says; the tutor providing lengthy explanations about a subject, or the tutor assigning marks as 'rewards' for every question answered correctly by the student. In these examples the tutor is taking up the voice of a teacher.

The *institutional discourse* seemed to be part of every layer in which one could think of online learning as practice: in the authorship of the learning materials, in the relationship with the students, in the assessment practices, for example. The institutional discourse was therefore also an important driving force shaping the practices the way they were. It is my attention to the institutional discourse and the way in which this emerges in my data chapters that supports my claim of a Foucauldian perspective on discourse in this thesis, operationalised by the work of Gee and Fairclough. This perspective is only partially given by the literature I reviewed here. It is more fully articulated through my analysis of the data later in the thesis, in particular.

When I started my first case study I started to pay attention to how tutors and learners engaged via the texts produced for the courses; a number of which were 'learning tasks'. These tasks had been written and were conducted in different ways; drawing upon different discourses, hence *shaping* the practices in particular ways.

Language is the main mean of communication with the learner in online learning; other elements such as body language and gestures are not usually present in this mode of study. The term language in this study is not used as *parole*, in the Saussurean (1972) sense in which language is perceived as a system itself independently of its use; but as language-in-use in specific social domains, such as in online learning in higher education. It is through language-in-use (little 'd' discourses) that the practices of teaching and learning online are constructed; therefore language-in-use was an important element to understand these practices.

I then refined my research questions to explore the relationship between the language used in the task design and during the conduction of the tasks (that is, the *task in action*), and the discourses that I had already identified. Just as a reminder, these were my initial research questions:

1. What are the main discourses embedded in the e-learning practices?
2. How do these discourses shape the practices?
3. How can a discursive perspective be useful in course design?

I now propose the following refined questions:

1. How does the language of the tasks underpin e-learning practices?
2. How do didactic and institutional discourses contribute to the shaping of collaborative learning practices in e-learning?
3. How can a discursive perspective on e-learning help to bridge the gap between learning theory and pedagogical practice in the field?

Within this new perspective I propose to investigate the role that language and discourse have in shaping learning practices. Owing to the fact that online learning practices mostly happen through language and language-in-use instantiate discourses; the latter is then an important concept with which to understand these practices. How the learning tasks are presented to the learners and how the tutor goes about conducting these tasks are my main interest in this study.

The investigation of these refined research questions aims to fill in a gap in the online learning literature; which is the lack of a discursive perspective in which to think of the language of the learning tasks. This thesis aims to bring a contribution to the field of

Educational Technology; by adopting a discourse approach to look at the role language has in shaping e-learning practices I propose to look at some of the complexities and contradictions that appear in the relationship theory-practice, that is, how the teaching approach 'in use' and the discourses associated with them affect the actual practices. This relationship is underpinned by the discourses instantiated in the language of the learning tasks.

The findings have the potential to make the underlying discursive mechanisms underpinning these practices more visible to the practitioner, furthermore providing a range of perspectives in which to think of the language of the tasks during and after the course design process; and how language shapes these practices.

In relation to the refined research question number 1, instead of asking 'what are the discourses?', as I had previously proposed, I now focus on the language of the tasks, looking at how it underpins what happens in e-learning. During chapters two and three I have been demonstrating how collaborative learning is a frequent discourse; and how there are also other discourses, such as the didactic and the institutional, that are not as explicit as the collaborative learning one, nevertheless are shaping the practices in similar ways. A more productive question therefore, I believe, is one that focuses on elements of course design, such as the language of the tasks. As I mentioned previously in this chapter, much of the research in e-learning tends to focus on the interactions of the learners in the discussion forum area of a course. What I propose here is to focus on the way in which tasks are presented and conducted, by looking at the language of the tasks in relation to a discursive perspective.

Question number two is still about discourses shaping the practices in e-learning, but now I propose a better understanding of both explicit and common sense discourses. This means going a step further than just investigating how discourses shape the practices, without making this distinction between them. Common sense discourses are

powerful because they work in a type of invisible way, therefore influencing the practices in a more subtle way. The power of the institutional discourse is in its invisibility, the common sense ways of getting things done.

Finally, in question three I enquire about a discursive perspective on e-learning practices, so this question relates by enlarge to my framework for analysis. I thought it would be more productive to think of this discursive perspective within an analytical aim. In this particular instance the aim is to offer an understanding of the mismatch between theory and practice in the field, which is something partly addressed by other researchers (such as Jones, 1999 and De Laat and Lally, 2003), but not using a frameworks offered by discourse analysis.

3.8 Reviewing the terminology

I have introduced a great deal of terminology so far and it is not always clear in the literature what these terms mean in practice (indeed, sometimes meanings overlap), but I will state what I understand by them, and how they are valuable for me in exploring this field. This idea of discourses blending and interoperating within a discourse order is termed *interdiscursivity*; and this is a significant feature of my data, which I explore by indicating how the discourses in online teaching and learning are constantly drawing upon other discourses and evolving.

The different discourses that co-exist are *discourse types*. Collaborative learning is a discourse type and so is the didactic discourse. *Intertextuality* and *voice*, however, are concepts explored in terms of a more detailed data analysis, and they occur at the level of the little 'd' discourse. Certain little 'd' discourses (language choices, for example) feature repeatedly in different big 'D' discourses and carry with them meanings from different discourses. However, these meanings are negotiable because they are highly

context-dependent. Sometimes the linguistic choices keep the meaning with which they are used in a particular discourse, while at other times the context will shape the meaning into something else.

For example, in the context of e-learning, an aspect that I discuss is the use of the modalities in the language of the task. Depending on how they are used in a sentence, modalities may evoke characteristics of certain discourses. In the didactic discourse, for example, the learner is supposed to prove they have learned by demonstrating their understanding when responding to some specific tasks related to the content. Tasks located within this discourse will be presented using certain modalities that would be used in different ways if the task were, for example, located in the collaborative learning discourse domain. Whether these linguistic choices are located within the didactic discourse or the collaborative learning discourse depends on the context. What it shows, though, is that it is possible (and quite common) to have tasks linguistically located in the domain of the didactic discourse even when a collaborative learning approach is proposed. This is why interdiscursivity and intertextuality are useful concepts, because they allow me to explore both the broader discursive level of task design and the more immediate one, which is based upon some word choices.

The concept of voice operates alongside the concept of intertextuality, because it is by identifying the voices in the texts that intertextuality is recognised. It also operates as a characteristic of a type of discourse, because those voices will be located from the perspective of a particular discourse. In my data I identify the different voices in the text and locate them within a certain discursive perspective, depending on the context.

In the following chapter I introduce detailed aspects of the two case-studies carried out in this thesis, and explain how the data provided will be analysed in relation to the discourse theory presented in this chapter.

4 *Foregrounding the research: an introduction to the Unis@Digital and Syracuse case studies*

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce the two case studies of this thesis and discuss the data collection method and the analytical approach. I start by locating the study in a qualitative research paradigm by briefly discussing the case study method. I then provide detailed information on the two research settings and focus on my roles as both teacher-researcher and participant-observer.

Next, I discuss what the main object of the study is, and present how the concepts of voice and discourse were used to underpin the analysis of the data. Finally, I move on to explain how I analyse the data chronologically, and draw on different themes emerging from the context and from the literature to analyse the pedagogical practices in both settings.

4.2 Case study method, research settings and ethical issues

The two case studies in this thesis were conducted between August 2004 and June 2005. At the time the e-learning practices in these settings took place in virtual-learning environments, which provided tools such as discussion forums, students' portfolios and chats. At present, such technologies are still being used in e-learning courses in general, but also are often enhanced by newer and more participatory technologies,

which were not available then, such as Web 2.0⁵ ones. Web 2.0 technologies contrast with the former (Web 1.0) experience of the Internet, which offered the user access to a smaller set of information provided (Crook, 2008). Although the data dates from 2004-2005, when such newer technologies were not in place (at least not in the settings I studied), I would argue that what the analysis offers is still relevant to current pedagogical practices because it presents a way in which to think of how e-learning practices are shaped by a range of elements (e.g. discourses and voices) that are embedded in the pedagogical practices independently of the type of technology being used. The focus of my analysis is on understanding the relationship between the discourses underpinning the theoretical thinking in which the pedagogical practices are based and the actual pedagogical practices as they happen, within the constraints of the contexts.

Two of my research questions propose to explore how the language of the tasks underpins e-learning practices and how both the didactic and the institutional discourses contribute to the shaping of collaborative learning practices in e-learning. The third question proposes a discussion of what the first two enabled me to find out, allowing me to explore how a discursive perspective can help bridge the gap between academic theory and pedagogical practice in e-learning.

In the light of my literature review, my theoretical alignment and my research questions I started to consider what would be the most appropriate method for carrying out this research. I also started to explore what research settings I could use to collect the data needed to address these questions. The nature of the first two questions is very specific: I enquire about the language of the tasks in e-learning and also about the discourses that are shaping e-learning practices. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to focus my research on actual courses so that I would be able to look at the tasks in action, and also at the

⁵ Web 2.0 technologies encourage user-generated content.

contextual factors that would allow me to identify the discourses that are shaping the pedagogical practices.

However, within my qualitative and discursive approach to data analysis, I would have to limit my study on a given set of courses, in order to be able to take a closer look at the pedagogical practices in these settings. I started to explore what options were available to me, and at the time I had a couple of options that seemed suitable. I was in contact with a university in Sao Paulo, Brazil, called UNISA, where I used to work as a lecturer before moving to the United Kingdom. I explained that I was involved in researching e-learning practices at the Open University, and UNISA immediately offered me the chance to carry out my study there if I needed. UNISA said they had recently established a distance education department, Unis@Digital, and that they were in the process of accrediting their courses for the purpose of national recognition. They explained that being able to support research into e-learning would count favourably towards their performance in the national assessment of universities for accreditation. Besides, they also said that they had been very happy with my work as a lecturer during the four years I had spent working for them, and that it would be a pleasure to have me back for some time to work with them. My main contact was the director of Unis@Digital, who had previously been the director of Language Studies, the department in which I used to work.

I decided to explore this offer further and one my supervisors at the Open University thought it would be useful to write⁶ to Unis@Digital to try to formalise the research agreement by officially asking for access to Unis@Digital as part of my research. Once the letter was accepted, Unis@Digital offered me the possibility of being a tutor for one of their new online undergraduate courses. The course was on Research Methods, and the subject appeared to be appropriate at the time because I had completed a Masters'

⁶ The letter from my supervisor requesting research access is in the appendix 1 (4.1, p. 267).

degree at the Open University in the same subject area. I decided to accept the offer and started to prepare for my research in Brazil. The course involved occasional face-to-face tutorials and I thought it was an excellent opportunity for me to be immersed in their context in order to better investigate my research questions. When I arrived at Unis@Digital I was introduced to all members of staff, people that I would have to work with on a daily basis. I was introduced to them as a teacher-researcher in an official meeting led by the unit director⁷.

When the course started I introduced myself to the students both by email and in my face-to-face initial meeting. I said that I was the tutor of the course, but that I was at the same time researching our teaching and learning practices. I explained that I was doing a PhD and that I aimed to look at how the course was designed, and the implications of that design for the way in which the course progressed. The students were ensured that there would be no connection between their marks and my research. I asked them to email me or speak to me directly if any of them did not approve of my role as researcher, or if they felt they would not like to take part in the study. They were also assured of my commitment to anonymity in relation to the data I was to collect. I also explained to them that the research would not be totally confidential because I would be expected to publish it when I concluded my PhD, or would maybe have to present the research at a conference, for example. The students said they did not see a problem in relation to confidentiality, and nor did the Unis@Digital administration. None of the students contacted me either to opt out of or express reservations about the study.

The choice for my second research setting followed a slightly different approach. Initially I wanted to be the tutor in another online course but this was not possible, as there were no courses available which would allow me to carry out both tutoring and research roles. However, I knew someone at Syracuse University, in the United States,

⁷ I provide more details of the Unis@Digital research setting further in this chapter.

who would become the gatekeeper⁸ for my second study. His name was Robert⁹ and he was someone I had known professionally for many years. He offered to help me gain access to a course at Syracuse University. He first contacted a tutor in his department to grant access to me as the course in which this tutor was tutoring seemed to be ideal – it was an undergraduate course with a large number of students enrolled – so it was likely to give me reasonably good data.

Although this tutor had unofficially agreed for me to research his course, when I sent him the informed consent document to be delivered to the students prior to my access to the online environment, he decided that I should wait for the research board of the university to make a final decision, but this research board was not going to meet again for another three months. This would certainly delay my access to the course, and therefore I would not be able to follow the course and the discussions synchronously with the course delivery while it was taking place. Because of these problems my gatekeeper offered me his own course to be researched, the difference being that his course had a smaller number of students and was at Master's level. He said the research board would most likely approve my research, and that if any problems arose he would let me know in due course.

The course had already been running for two weeks when I finally gained access to the research setting, due to the initial delay in the negotiation. The study was to be carried out entirely online, and when I got access to the course I was introduced to the students by Robert as a guest and a researcher. I also emailed the students explaining my role as researcher and providing the same information I had given to the Unis@Digital students. As in the previous research setting, all the students in the course at Syracuse University were happy to accept my role.

⁸ By 'gatekeeper' I mean the person who facilitated my access to the research setting.

⁹ 'Robert' is a fictitious name.

At the time I conducted these studies (2004-2005) there seemed to be less ethical guidelines/procedures than now. When I joined the Open University as a research student, for example, and proposed carrying out this study, there was no formal mechanism for ethical considerations in place in the university. However, I discussed and agreed my ethical approach with my supervisors before carrying out the studies.

Now that I have explained how I gained access to the research settings, I will turn my attention back to the discussion of the case study method in this thesis. The case study method was my way of approaching the research questions. It seemed to be the most appropriate way of conducting this research because it would enable me to immerse myself in the two settings to investigate their teaching and learning practices in relation to the contexts. I did consider other methods, as for example Action Research and Ethnography. I decided not to opt for Action Research because I had a different role in the two cases, while I was a tutor in the first research setting, I was a participant-observer in the second, therefore not able to get the total immersion that I managed to get in the first course. As a participant-observer, I would have limitations as to what I could do in the course.

In terms of Ethnography, one could suggest that my research has some elements of an ethnographic study. Mitchell (1984:237) argues:

“[...] what distinguishes case studies from more general ethnographic reportage is the details and particularity of the account. Each case study is a description of a specific configuration of events in which some distinctive set of actors have been involved in some defined situation at some particular point in time.”

My research does indeed have some elements of ethnography in the sense that I am trying to provide rich descriptions of the research settings based on my participation. However, I am focusing on specific perspectives of the courses to provide these

descriptions, such as the courses tasks, and their relevant associated data (e.g. discussion forums, emails, and notices where the tasks are elucidated). I am also focusing on data in which I can indentify the discourses working in practice, and this data consist of not only the course tasks but also discussion forum messages, institutional documents, personal observations, emails and interviews. Despite their contextual differences, both Unis@Digital and Syracuse University can be considered “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984:239). This means that the particularities of each case in terms of the presentation and the carrying out of the tasks helps me to explain the less evident theoretical assumptions that I am attempting to explore, as for example, how discourses contribute to the shaping of e-learning practices.

Case studies can be defined in various ways. Mitchell (1984:239) defines case studies as “the detailed presentation of ethnographic data relating to some sequence of events from which the analyst seeks to make some theoretical inference”. Yin (2009) argues that case studies can illustrate certain topics in a descriptive mode. The term case study is also used to identify a type of research that differs from the other two traditional types of research in social sciences: the experiment and the social survey (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000). Hammersley and Gomm suggest that in one sense all research is case study because there is always some unit, or set of units, in relation to which data are collected and/or analysed (2002:2). Case studies in education are usually concerned with the investigation of pedagogical practices in teaching and learning settings, e.g. the assessment of curricula, pedagogical perspectives for teaching and the interaction among participants (students and tutors, for example). Case studies may also be a form of investigation of institutional issues that might be interrelated with these practices. In this thesis for example, I use the case study method to understand the practices of e-learning in higher education, particularly through the language of the tasks and how these tasks are elucidated (this includes some discussion forum messages and other

data such as interviews, emails and document analysis). I look at e-learning practices through the pedagogical perspectives embedded in the design of the courses, at the same time taking into consideration other factors that may influence the design and implementation, such as the context. The term case study also usually refers to the type of data that is collected – usually unstructured data, which will be analysed qualitatively (Hammersley and Gomm, 2000).

As the case study method allows the researcher to focus on a specific configuration of events, with specific actors (Mitchell, 1984) it seemed very suitable for my purpose. It would allow me to focus on the language of the tasks and task implementation in each case, as well as to focus on collecting data from specific 'actors'; the participants involved in course design or tutoring in each case, including myself. The case study method offered me the possibility to look at exactly what I wanted to learn from the case studies. It would be only by looking at the language of the tasks and how they were conducted during a given presentation of a course that I would be able to understand how the language used underpinned e-learning practices. Likewise, only by being immersed in a given course context I would be able to explore how the discourses were contributing to the shape of the pedagogical practices. The case study method allowed me to look at both courses independently, at the same time constructing an argument that would be based on the analysis of the pedagogical practices in both research settings.

In the case studies I carried out I was able to collect a range of data by means of observations, interviews and actual course tasks. The choice for these research settings was therefore in part pragmatically driven, in terms of what I had access to (and I recognise the limitations about that), but also because the opportunities to immerse myself in given course presentations seemed to fit well with the analytical requirements of my research questions. As I mentioned previously, it would be by taking a closer look

at the daily activities of the courses that I would be able to get a picture of what was influencing the shaping of the pedagogical practices.

The case studies are therefore the sites in which I acted as a teacher-researcher and as a participant-observer. Although I locate the Unis@Digital case-study historically in terms of the Brazilian political background at that time, and present a little bit of the history of the course in question at Syracuse, these are part of the context in which the case studies took place, but are not the *cases* themselves. Although one may argue that there is no clear distinction between the contexts and the cases because I am taking data from both, I have specific objects of study in this thesis, which are: the particular presentations of two e-learning courses (2004 and 2005), from specific institutions and named tutors (one of them being me).

I acknowledge that there are limitations in using the case study method. These limitations derive mostly from the contexts in which I carried out this research. The contexts offered me opportunities to engage with the courses at different levels (as a teacher-researcher and as a participant-observer). At the same time, by taking up these roles, I became bounded by the restrictions that these roles would impose on me. I would be able to do some types of research (e.g. case study), but not necessarily others (e.g. survey). As a teacher-researcher at Unis@Digital, for example, I had the freedom to communicate with the students more closely, but I also had the duty to care for their learning and for the fulfilment of the institutional norms. At Syracuse University, as a participant-observer, I could only interact with the students and with the institutional context up to a certain level (of a guest). Thus, I was much less close to the students and to the context at Syracuse University than I was as a tutor at Unis@Digital. Nevertheless, both cases provided me with opportunities to perform roles which enabled me to look at the e-learning practices in these settings more closely and to carry out the analysis I needed to be able to answer the questions I asked. The point of connection between

these two studies is that they were both online courses offered to adults in higher education, and both attempted to implement a similar approach (collaborative learning) in teaching practices. Further in this chapter I present the main similarities and differences between the two case studies. An introduction to both research settings follows in the sections below.

4.3 Case study 1: Unis@Digital

The first case study took place at University of Santo Amaro (Unisa), in São Paulo, Brazil – or more precisely at its online learning department, Unis@Digital. At the time I collected my data the department was only two years old, meaning that the courses being offered were quite new to the students. My face-to-face investigation at Unis@Digital took place in the second academic semester of 2004 (August-December), during which I tutored at the Metodologia Científica (Research Methods) course to undergraduate students in their first year of university. Speaking from a researcher's position, it was extremely valuable to be a tutor in the course. In terms of data analysis for example, I am able to give insider accounts that would not have been possible otherwise. In terms of the data at Unis@Digital, and particularly the pieces of text written by me, I have the benefit of speaking from my own experience and to bring in contextual information that allows me to interrogate the pedagogical practice from different perspectives.

Below is the front page of the course, which was offered via the Brazilian platform TelEduc, which was developed by a state university called UNICAMP:

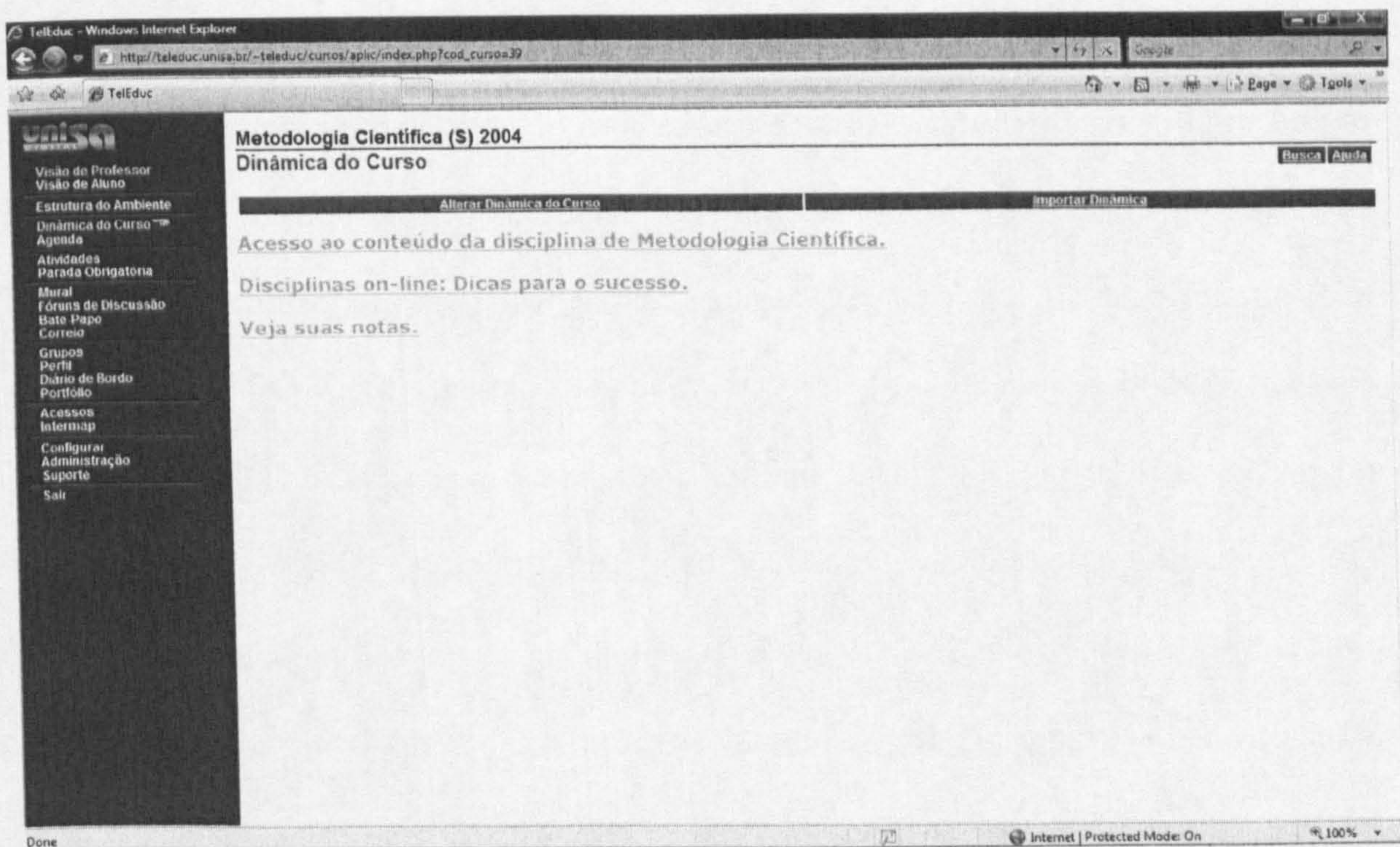


Figure 4.1 - Front page of Metodologia Científica course in the TelEduc environment

Brazilian education legislation at the time stated that universities were able to offer up to 20% of courses (disciplines) within a given degree in the form of distance learning, which meant every student enrolled in a conventional four-year undergraduate degree course would be able to study around five disciplines online in the course of their studies. Research Methods was one of the courses available for online study. However, despite the course being offered entirely online, the students were expected to take the exams on a face-to-face basis. The academic semester was divided into two terms and at the end of each term there was a face-to-face assessment. For the students who did not manage to achieve the minimum grade to pass the course by the end of the second semester, there was a final exam, also face-to-face, which provided them with a second chance.

In my group I had thirty-four students, all considered 'mature students' because they were aged over twenty-five. They were studying for different degrees: business administration, economics, and foreign trade. Research Methods was a compulsory

discipline in all courses in the first year. Although the discipline was offered both as an online and as a traditional face-to-face course, if a student opted for studying online they could not opt back into face-to-face studying during that same semester – that was an institutional rule. In many ways I understand why it was important to keep some consistency in the mode of study – it would be very difficult in terms of administration of enrolments to deal with a large number of students hopping here and there between the face-to-face and distance modes during the semester. In both course modes, although the content was the same, the activities and tasks were slightly different, so managing all the grades and registrations could prove a difficult task.

During the semester the students exhibited different attitudes towards the online course. Although online study was a new experience for all of them, some assumed full responsibility for being a self-directed learner and some did not. The course was very structured, divided into two blocks that were meant to be studied in full prior to each assessment. All the activities requested were assigned marks (e.g. 1 point, 2 points) towards their final grade. They had pre-arranged chat sessions and discussion forums in which to discuss the content of the course. The whole course was closely accompanied by the tutor (me), who was available by email and telephone to speak to the students at their request during my office hours. However, because this was their very first experience in studying online, they did not know what to expect; they needed guidance for every single step of the course, from how to access the course page to how to study online. This help was offered both by me and by the Unis@Digital technical and coordination team, and as a result our roles frequently overlapped. In chapter 5 I show how I often had to guide the students on how to access the course environment and make use of the platform TelEduc.

Back in 2004 in Brazil, online courses were only just starting to become popular at universities, so they were a very new mode of education for most students. Previously it

had been common to find people comparing online courses to the old distance education model that was popular in Brazil decades ago: the correspondence model. This model was seen by many as an inferior type of education; its value was largely unrecognised, and its academic rigour frequently questioned, and this perception has extended to e-learning (Infonet Educação, 2010). Thus, when online distance learning started to be adopted by the universities, it was common to come across negative comments regarding this mode of study. It was only when the Brazilian Ministry of Education decided to regularise this mode of education, passing rigorous legislation that had to be complied with by universities, that students, along with Brazilian society in general, slowly began to gain confidence in this new mode of study – but this did not happen until late 2005. What Unis@Digital was offering in 2004 was the possibility for the students to spend up to 20% of their study time in the distance mode, which would correspond to about one discipline a year out of six. At the time, full online degrees in Brazil were in the process of accreditation and Unis@Digital was preparing itself for this process.

4.3.1 My role as a teacher-researcher at Unis@Digital

At Unis@Digital I was introduced to the students as a teacher-researcher, which I believe to have been a useful definition of my role. It is a term often used in educational research to indicate a dual role: the one of tutoring a course at the same time researching it (Myers, 1985; McGonigal 1999; Wiesemes, 2002). I need to clarify, however, that my use of the term *teacher-researcher* in this thesis does not signal a particular pedagogical approach. I use it because it was adopted by Unis@Digital to refer to my dual role in the institution. While tutoring the course I was also researching the teaching and learning practices of the institution, particularly the ones

of my own course. These pedagogical practices were not only defined by what I did but also by the course design and the teaching procedures that I was asked to follow. I also researched general institutional practices and their associated discourses, which I present in chapter 5.

An important part of my data is my 'insider accounts' as a teacher-researcher. Although I was there at Unis@Digital to investigate the institutional practices, I have to acknowledge that my own involvement with the research setting (in the role of course tutor) produced a type of bias. As I mentioned earlier, I had commitments to fulfil towards the learners and the institution, despite the commitment to my own research. Many times during my time at Unis@Digital I caught myself wondering what would be the most appropriate thing to do, as often the motivations of the researcher are different from the motivations of the tutor. For example, in block two of the Research Methods course I decided I would set up the groups for collaboration, not giving the students the chance to choose the peer learners they would want to work with. I decided which students would be engaged in which work group, and my choices were made wishing in each case to create a mixture of students with backgrounds in different degrees. In this instance my decision was that of Andreia-as-researcher and not Andreia-as-tutor. I wanted to experiment with mixing up students from different degree courses so the chances they would know each other would be fewer and therefore they would be more likely to work online rather than face to face, so I thought. My line of thinking was that if the students were to form the groups themselves, they would tend to choose those students they see on a regular basis on campus, the ones that are studying for the same degree and are from the same classroom. However, if I interfered and made the choice for them, I thought that by mixing up the groups I would increase the chance to see them working online, because they would not necessarily know each other personally.

My aim was to get them doing the collaborative work online and not face-to-face. It was my research interest that drove me to take such decision. If I were thinking as a tutor I would perhaps not have made the choice to mix up the group myself, because it seems more democratic in a collaborative learning environment to allow the students to choose who they wish to study with.

In qualitative research the research accounts, although subjective, should not be denied validity for research purposes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983/2002). I used to make notes about my impressions of the day during my time at Unis@Digital and also during data collection online at the Syracuse course, which helped me to understand the contexts in many ways. Likewise, many times it was the participants' insider accounts that would make me understand why they were doing things in the ways they were, particularly at Unis@Digital where I had more contact with the learners and staff members. To give an example, I exchanged many personal emails with the students at Unis@Digital during the course. These emails were not 'part of the course per se', but they certainly consisted of important information (most of it unsolicited) concerning how the students understood their roles and about their successes and frustrations in attending an online course. The same happened at Syracuse, between Robert and the students, but for ethical reasons I did not have access to the messages exchanged with the tutor. This is the type of data that I term *personal communications*. These personal communications are in many ways *insider accounts*, as they help the researcher to construct an understanding of the case through his/her own perceptions and the perceptions of others.

I also consider interviews as insider accounts, but solicited ones. I interviewed one tutor at Unis@Digital, Lucia, who was offering the same course as me, but spread over two semesters instead of one. She gave me her own perspective on the students' achievements, and to a certain extent I too had experienced much of what she was

feeling. It made me more aware of my own feelings – as my role was very often divided between that of tutor and that of researcher.

My role as a teacher-researcher therefore did not have clear boundaries. The duties of the tutor and the duties of the researcher often overlapped, and I was constantly making decisions as to what seemed to be most appropriate. Sometimes my position as researcher came to the fore, at other times my perspective as tutor. This is a common phenomenon in qualitative research, usually called *reflexivity*, which is discussed in section 4.5 of this chapter.

4.4 Case study 2: Syracuse University

The second case study took place in a master's course offered by Syracuse University in the US in the first semester of 2005. The course was called *Methods and Techniques for Teaching and Training Adults*. Below is the front page of the course, which was offered using the WebCT platform:

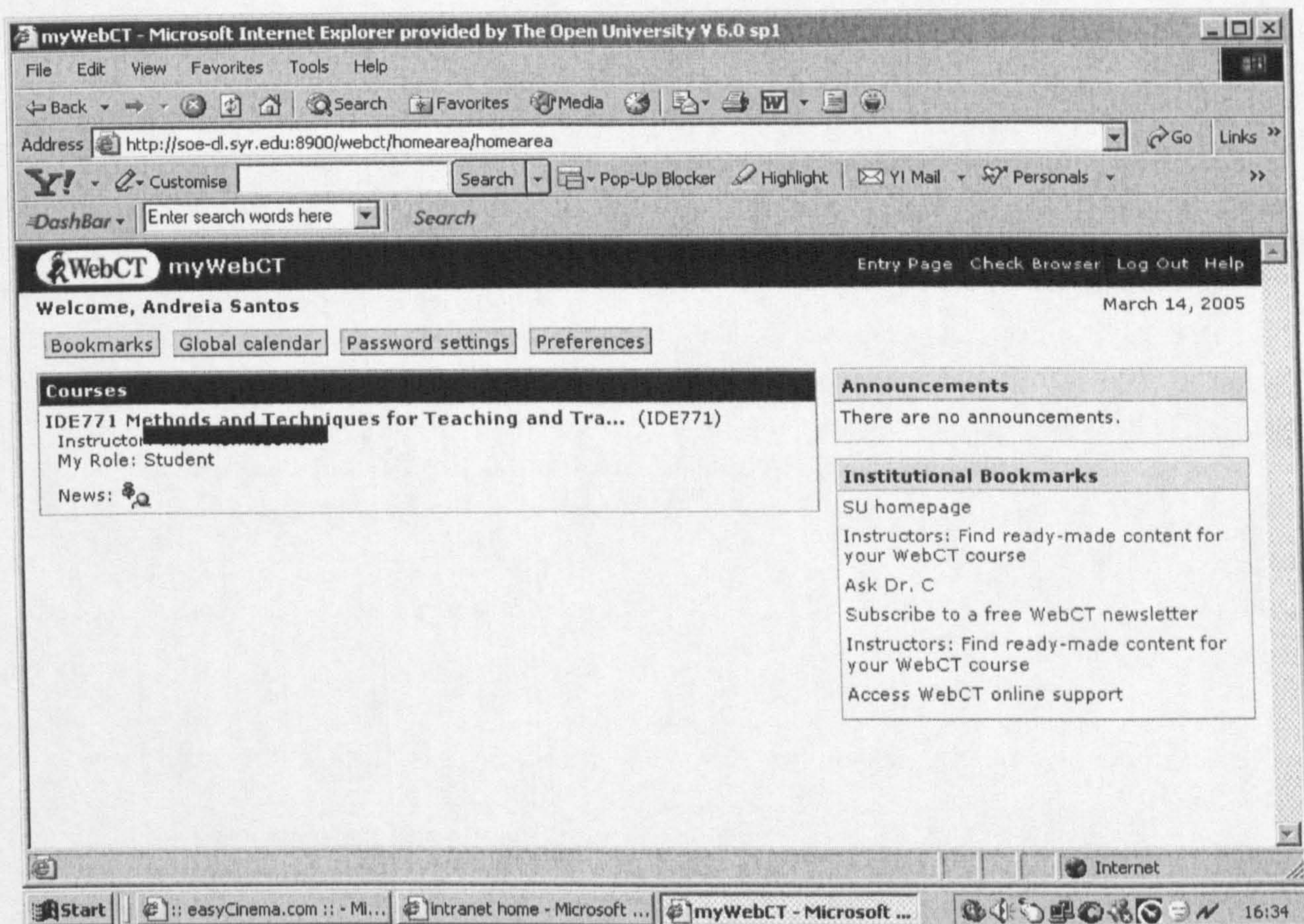


Figure 4.2 - Front page of Syracuse course in the WebCT platform

This course was part of the Masters in Distance Education programme at Syracuse, and was aimed at both students and professionals in education who wanted to learn different methods and approaches to teaching adults online. This course, like the one at Unisa, also had an element of blended learning because the first two sessions were offered face to face, on campus. However, there were no compulsory face-to-face exams. The assignments were submitted online, mostly as a form of continuous assessment and a final course project. The students registered for this course were also considered mature students, and after some drop-outs there were six of them in total. However, unlike at Unis@Digital, at least half of the students were already very used to studying online. In an interview I conducted with the tutor in May 2005, this is what he had to say about the students' background:

"[...] In fact it is a small group. As you know we have only six students after a few drop-outs, and 100% of the 6 students are on campus. They are not all taking the course online just because it's online and it's not necessarily their preference; in fact, for most of them it is their preference online, because of six, 1, 2, 3, four for sure, maybe all six, but four for sure are full, full-time employed. And are studying part-time. And two of them ... three of them are employed in roles which involve online learning. One is the university's webmaster for Blackboard, another one is the University College support person for students in terms of learning problems when they are on online courses. [...] So he looks after pedagogical and personal issues, not technical issues, and the third who is a girl responsible for planning and designing online learning in another school department. So, three out of six are people who use online learning, work for online learning, so it's very natural for them to choose online learning."

(4.1¹⁰, extract of interview with Robert, course tutor)

In some ways the profile of the Syracuse students was different from that of the Brazilian students. Not only were they taking a postgraduate course rather than an undergraduate one, but they were already familiar with online learning. However, in both cases they were campus-based students who were studying most courses face-to-face and had the chance to opt for one online course. The pedagogy used for online teaching at Syracuse and Unis@Digital were based on similar principles of collaborative learning. In both case studies the students were expected to do tasks together using the forum tools of the virtual learning environments and also to work in groups collaboratively.

In the case of Syracuse, given the fact that the students were expected to be more self-directed as they were studying a postgraduate course, the approach gave them greater responsibility to take control of their studies. Most of the course design drew on the principles of andragogy, an approach to teaching adults fostered by Malcolm Knowles in the late 60s, which encourages the learners to work collaboratively with their colleagues and with the tutor in order to make the most of their pre-existing knowledge to create new knowledge. One of the reasons why andragogy was used as a main principle in

¹⁰ Further in this chapter I explain how I label the data extracts.

teaching students at Syracuse was so that they would conveniently learn about andragogy at the same time as experiencing the approach themselves. In this sense, the object of study (andragogy) was also instantiated in the shaping of the course design.

Andragogy is an approach to adult teaching that considers the students' needs and motivation as the main driving forces of their learning. The andragogic model sustains the notion of a 'focus on learner's abilities', their needs and also desire for learning. The principles of learning in the andragogic model support the idea that an adult learner is capable of, or should be taking the initiative for, their own learning, and should be given the opportunity to choose how to achieve their learning goals. For example, a reasonably flexible syllabus – with different learning activities and tasks, which could be adapted to different learning styles – would be consistent with such an approach.

In the book 'Andragogy in Action', Knowles (1984:8) presents the difference between the role of the learners' experience in a pedagogical model and in the andragogic model. In the first, it is assumed that the learner starts an educational activity with little experience that is of much value as a resource for learning. Hence, the learner has to learn from the teacher, the one who has the knowledge and the experience. In this context, the main pedagogical approach is traditional techniques, such as lectures, audiovisual presentations and assigned readings. In the latter, it is assumed that adults start an educational activity with previous experiences that serve as resources for learning. In this perspective, the adult learners are themselves the richest resources for one another; hence the emphasis on techniques such as group discussion, simulation exercises, field experiences, problem-solving projects and laboratory experiences. All these techniques use the experiences of the learners. The learning contract also has a special role in andragogy. It places greater emphasis on an individualized learning plan in order to value the vast range of experience among a group of adults – each learner

will be able to draw on their own experiences and to share them with the peer learning group. The techniques cited above are based mostly on the principle of collaboration.

In the andragogic approach it is important to sustain a climate of collaborativeness (Knowles, 1984:154). Knowles argues that in earlier school experiences competition for grades was the norm, and because of this adults tend to start an educational activity with an attitude of 'rivalry' toward fellow participants, which now must be changed into a 'sharing' relationship. The attitude of the learners must change because in the andragogic approach the peers are seen as the richest resources for learning, and therefore they have to be able to work together. I see Knowles' explanation as partly true, but rather simplistic. As well as having earlier educational experiences the adult learner is engaged in many other activities and commitments, e.g. family (maybe parenting), work, and other social roles. Working in a group, sharing experiences and discussing educational goals constitutes an idealised view of adult education, one which is sometimes impossible to create in reality for simple reasons such as lack of time to engage in these group discussions.

Nevertheless, the principles of Andragogy used to conduct this course are in many ways similar principles to the collaborative learning approach, such as an emphasis in group work in order to explore the knowledge of each group member to best achieve a desired outcome; through knowledge exchange between course participants and the tutor. Andragogy and constructivism are both student-centred approaches to learning, which is to say they concentrate on the students' needs and previous/existing knowledge. Both focus on self-transformation and self-development.

The extract I present below illustrates how collaborative learning was embedded in the thinking of the tutor at Syracuse, and therefore influenced his practices (from appendix 6.27, p. 325-326):

“Maybe we are treating the discussion activities more as a place to answer some open-ended quiz-like questions (‘this is what I got out of the reading – bye-bye’) rather than an opportunity to share ideas and collaborate in the construction of our knowledge (‘this is what I got out of it; how about you?; oh, yeah, how come?; so where does that take us?; why should we want to go there anyway?) [...]”

Text of the task, from Robert (Syracuse tutor)

Robert in the extract above shows that he perceives collaboration between learners as an essential part of their learning process, and sees it as an important activity to be performed via the discussion forum tool of the virtual learning environment. He mentions that the learners should ‘collaborate in the construction of their knowledge’. The terms ‘construction of knowledge’ and ‘collaboration’, contextually used as he does, locate his argument within a collaborative learning perspective.

4.4.1 My role as a participant-observer

In the Syracuse case study I was a participant observer. I was allowed by the course tutor to participate in the course as much as I wanted, and to provide comments as a type of expert guest in the course. The delay in my getting access to the course made it more difficult for me to engage with the students as much as I would have liked; I was always trying to catch up with the discussions and had also missed the ice-breaking session in the beginning when everybody was getting to know each other and trying to familiarise themselves with their peer learners.

Perhaps due to this delay in the initial access negotiation and my missing of the ice-breaking activities, I noticed that my contributions felt as if they were coming from an outsider. Most students were engaged in the discussions between themselves (some of them knew each other from previous courses they took together) and did not interact

with me as much as I expected. It could also be because I was invited in a type of researcher/ expert guest position, and my relationship with them could be perceived more as a voice of authority rather than the voice of a peer student, so they did not feel the need to respond to me directly. I decided then to reduce my participation in the discussions in order not to disrupt the flow of the course, and I ended up being more an observer than a participant throughout the course.

4.5 Reflexivity, generalizability and replicability

A common concern in case study research is the idea of reflexivity. It tends to run counter to any conception that social research can be carried out in an autonomous way, without the influence of the researcher. Hammersley and Atkinson argue that “reflexivity implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983/2002:16).

In this sense, the concept of reflexivity supports the idea that all sorts of social research somehow take the form of participant observation. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983/2002), the recognition of reflexivity implies that the claim that social phenomena will be observed without any sort of interference from the researcher should be abandoned. In my roles of teacher – researcher in Unis@Digital case study and of participant-observer at Syracuse, it is a fact that a certain level of reflexivity was inevitably embedded in part of my pedagogical practice in both research settings. It was in my constant reflections about my duties as a tutor and my interests as a researcher that at a times I found myself caught in between these roles trying to decide what the best action to take was. For example, at Unis@Digital it was often the case that I

questioned the ways in which the course tasks were designed, but in my role of a tutor I had to follow the instructions I was given by the institution.

On a related matter, both generalizability and replicability of findings are usually expected in research, from a positivist point of view, so that universal laws can be created about the world. However, in qualitative research in general, and particularly in this study, the generalizability and replicability of findings are not the main goal. Being the object of study characterized by the uniqueness of the situations and the impossibility of controlling variables, both replicability and generalizability are concepts that cannot be sustained in this type of research based on case studies.

In terms of generalizability for example, Schofield (1993) argues that there are some attempts by researchers to claim to what extent qualitative research is committed to generalizability issues. According to him, some researchers claim for generalizability through the synthesis of pre-existing qualitative studies. Others replace the concept of generalizability with that of 'fittingness', in which generalizability can be argued by the analysis of the degree in which a situation matches with others in the same field of interest. In this study, generalizability of findings is not the main goal, but certainly the contribution of its findings to a future generalisation in the light of further research is.

4.6 Introduction to data collection, selection, analysis and presentation

In this section I explore the process I followed for data collection, selection and analysis. My empirical focus for discourse analysis is based on the course tasks and a range of other data, which I describe below.

4.6.1 Data collection:

I started by collecting all available data in the case studies because all this data forms useful background contextual knowledge:

- **Course content:** *All course content was collected.*

The courses were offered through virtual learning environments (VLEs). In the case of Unis@Digital, a VLE called *Teleduc* was used. At Syracuse the VLE in use was *WebCT*. The content the students were studying was presented in the content areas of these VLEs. I collected the content from both the courses' in my study.

- **Course tasks:** *All course tasks were collected.*

In e-learning, *course tasks* are also known as *course activities*. In this thesis, I often refer to course tasks as simply *tasks*. The tasks refer to the activities the students were asked to do in order to engage with the content, that is, to practice or test the understanding of the course content. For example, in both case studies the students were asked to read and discuss particular texts or to carry out research on specific topics. These type of learning activities are what I call tasks. In this thesis, the tasks are essential data. This is because my first research question is about the tasks. Therefore, I collected all tasks from both case studies.

- **Emails and notices:** *All emails and notices were collected.*

In the VLEs of both courses there was a feature called *email*. Through this feature the students could contact each other privately. The students could also contact the tutor and vice-versa. I only had access to emails that were addressed to me.

All the emails that were sent to me were collected as data.

The email feature served different purposes: sometimes the students used it individually to ask me about deadlines for tasks or to query exam marks. Other times I used the email feature to contact all the students regarding a deadline, or to give further explanation about a task.

The notices were messages that were posted to the VLE, available for all students to see. These messages could be posted by the tutor, by the course coordinator or administrator. They usually related to exam dates and room numbers for face-to-face meetings.

- **Discussion forum messages:** *All discussion forum messages were collected.*

The discussion forum messages also served different purposes. Sometimes a discussion thread was used for the students to collaboratively discuss a topic that they were studying. Other times the messages in the discussion forum corresponded to the tasks themselves. For example, the Syracuse tutor often posted the tasks as forum messages, rather than in the content area of the VLE. The forum feature was also often used to clarify the tasks.

- **Institutional document:** *One institutional document was collected.*

I had access to only one institutional document, which was from Unis@Digital. No documents were available at Syracuse. In general terms, the institutional document at Unis@Digital discussed the teaching approach employed by the institution, as well as the duties of the various members of staff including the tutors.

- **Personal observations/personal communications:** *Personal observations and communications were documented and included in my data.*

Personal observations were notes that I took throughout my engagement with the two research settings, Unis@Digital and Syracuse. I took notes as a teacher-

researcher at Unis@Digital and as a participant-observer at Syracuse. Personal communications correspond to the notes that I took as a result of informal conversations I had with members of staff at both research settings, which provided me with an insider view of the contexts.

- **Interviews:** *Five interviews were carried out and transcribed.*

I conducted five interviews, four at Unis@Digital with staff members, and one at Syracuse with the course tutor. These interviews are presented in full in the appendices of the thesis.

4.6.2 Data selection

I interrogated all the data collected, as described in 4.6.1 above. This interrogation was done by identifying what could be useful for my data analysis, that is, data that were relevant to the research questions (p. 96) . The research questions focus both on the tasks and on the discourses which have been identified in my literature review (the collaborative learning, didactic and institutional discourses). I set aside all the course content and all the data which were concerned with students' actual responses to the tasks. This included those emails or discussion forum messages in which the students were actually doing the tasks, that is those in which they were responding to the activities proposed. I did not analyse any of this data any further.

The next stage was my selection of the data for close analysis. This is described in detail below:

- **Course tasks:** In order to address my first research question all course tasks were selected for close analysis . As I mentioned previously, the tasks were presented to the learners in different electronic areas of the course. Some of them were sent as emails, some posted within forum messages and some

uploaded into the course content area of the VLE. The tasks that I analysed were taken from these three different electronic contexts, namely emails, discussion forum messages and the content area in the VLE. I am using the word 'tasks' to describe the instructions which the students had to follow to carry out a learning activity. These tasks form an integral part of my data analysis. I do not analyse students' responses to these instructions in this thesis.

- **Emails and notices:** I selected for analysis the emails that were exchanged between tutors and students when they were clarifying the tasks. Emails, however, are sensitive data, because they are sent on a private basis. Therefore, although I collected all the emails that were sent to me at Unis@Digital, I could only select for my data analysis the emails from students who granted me consent to do so. The emails that I sent to the students as a group are not private. I sometimes sent a group email or posted a 'notice' in the course area. These types of emails and notices, if carrying relevant information, have been selected and included in my data analysis. I did not have access to the emails exchanged at Syracuse.
- **Forum messages:** I selected for analysis the forum messages which either contained a task (an instruction) or contained data that would help me in my analysis of the tasks. As I indicated above, I do not include in my data analysis the forum messages in which the students were actually responding to the tasks and engaging collaboratively in discussions of a given topic.
- **Interviews:** All the interviews were analysed.
- **Personal observations/personal communications:** All personal observations and personal communications were analysed. These recorded my reflections

during my actual engagement with the research settings, either as a teacher-researcher or as a participant-observer.

- **The institutional document (Unis@Digital):** I collected only one institutional document (at Unis@Digital) which was included in my data analysis.

4.6.3 Data analysis and presentation

After selecting the data as described above I began a close analysis of this data:

1. The analysis of all the course tasks and other types of data that clarified the tasks (e.g. discussion forum messages and emails)
2. The analysis of the institutional document, interviews and personal observations. The analysis of the tasks fed into the analysis of this data and vice-versa, as it was an iterative process of analysis.

Certain themes began to emerge, including the 'role of the tutor', 'participation' and 'assessment'. I also began to identify aspects of the three discourses which had previously been identified through my literature review.

In this stage I analysed this data by placing them in a matrix of discourses, and this is something that I approach in this thesis by drawing on the concept of interdiscursivity, which I present in chapter 3. I created flow charts and data displays both digitally and on paper in order to help me make sense of the data and identify some patterns. An example of one of the steps of my analysis process can be seen in the appendices (p. 266) where I include a photo I took of one of my paper flowcharts. I used my research questions to guide my interpretation of the data, and as I was enquiring about the themes in the language of the tasks and the three discourses identified, I tried not to digress from this focus. I acknowledge, however, that further research is needed to

explore aspects of the data that I did not focus on (the students' messages and the role of technology are some examples – this limitation is further discussed in the final chapter).

Table 4.1 - Amount of data collected and presented in the thesis per type

	The policy document	Emails and notices	The tasks	Forum messages	Interviews	Personal observations/ Communications
Unis@Digital						
collected	1	54	4	166	4	8
presented	1	9	4	3	4	1
Syracuse						
collected	0	0	17	388	1	5
presented	0	0	17	3	1	1

My personal observations and personal communications come in the form of my own narrative, bringing in my personal observations throughout the analysis of all data types. I include samples of these observations in the appendices (appendix 2, p. 313 and appendix 3, p. 337), Therefore, these personal observations will not come in the form of a labelled data type. These personal observations were done during my data collection process, and were kept in the form of notes at approximately every two weeks, or whenever I had a personal communication with a member of staff for example (in the case of Unis@Digital) that would address any of my research interests.

As I mentioned previously, all the data collected were important to the extent that they informed the design of the study and the refinement of my research questions. Apart from data that is countable (e.g. emails, forum messages) there were also many informal talks (by phone or face-to-face for example), and these are part of an essential type of data that I call *personal communications*. These are part of observable data, which served the purpose of guiding me through an understanding of the contexts and of the institutional discourses of each case. For example, I did not have access to an institutional document at Syracuse, which discussed the teaching approaches they were

drawing upon. However, it was during my informal conversations negotiating access with Robert, the tutor, which I came to know more of the driving forces behind their course design style, and of the contextual facts that shaped the pedagogical practices as they were. Through Robert I had the understanding that collaborative learning was a premise of the teaching style for that particular course at Syracuse, although it was performed through the lenses of Andragogy (e.g. the use of learning contracts). Andragogy in many ways encourages the learners to interact with each other and with the tutor to exchange previous knowledge and build new one, and in this sense its principles are very similar to the ones of collaborative learning.

At Syracuse I did not have access to the emails exchanged between the tutor and the students for privacy reasons, and this is why I do not present any. At Unis@Digital, however, the students exchanged email messages with me, but they were mostly regarding the administrative aspect of the course, such as: requests for taking the exams in different dates, enquiries about marks, contacts about personal circumstances (e.g. holidays etc), enquiries about course dates etc. In order to respect the privacy of the email exchanges between the students and myself, I restricted presentation of emails to those I managed to get the students' consent to. I asked for permission to present the specific emails that I believed were most polemic (such as 5.11, p. 270, discussed in chapter 5) or helped me to understand the connections between the different types of data (ex. 5.9, p. 163, 5.14, p. 272 and 5.18, p. 273, also discussed in chapter 5).

The analytical technique I used in these case studies drew upon the strategies of the 'explanation building' technique (Yin, 2009). Yin argues that in explanation building "the goal is to analyze the case study data by building an explanation about the case" (Yin, 2009:141). Yin also argues that usually the explanations reflect a significant theoretical proposition. In my study I undertook an ongoing iterative process in the analysis, in which I identify the discourses in the literature, in the institutional document and in the

contexts, and then find evidence for them in the data. I explain the cases and the data, mostly because I investigate two distinctive research settings, although they had a point of connection between them, which was the attempt to implement collaborative learning in the courses. Nevertheless, the contexts of these cases were different, and I could only make sense of the data and their relationship by building a detailed explanation of what I, as a researcher, perceived to be happening in those settings. I took a discourse perspective in the analysis, which enabled me to look at the data with the aim to identify and explain the discourses embedded in the pedagogical practices. When explanation building is applied to multiple case studies, such as in this case as I focus on two research settings, the goal is to build a general explanation that fits into each individual case (Yin, 2009). The identification of the same discourses in the two settings (collaborative learning, didactic and institutional) enabled me to find a point of connection between the cases, which goes beyond the attempt to implement collaborative learning. The presence of similar discourses in the two settings allowed me explore both case-specific and generic explanations that apply to the data in this research (from chapter 5 onwards).

The approach I take to analyse the data is chronological, that was what worked better for me because it allowed me to think of the sequence of the events more clearly. In both case studies I started by looking at the context, in particular the institutional discourse. In the Unis@Digital case study I analysed an institutional document which describes the teaching method fostered by the institution in their online courses, as well as the theories underpinning the pedagogical practices. At Syracuse, however, I did not have access to any institutional document, but I drew on informal conversations (insider accounts) with the tutor who taught the course in order to understand the thinking behind the pedagogical practices.

I also analysed the actual pedagogical practices. In the case of Unis@Digital the analysis

of the pedagogical practices involved a higher level of intervention, because I was the tutor of the course. At Syracuse, there was also intervention to a certain degree, but less than in the case of Unis@Digital.

In the analysis of the actual pedagogical practices I looked at a different range of data, seeking for data that is contextually located in a collaborative learning situation, and for those whose language is drawing on the didactic discourse (or vice-versa). I look at the word choices that 'in context' are aligned with the discourses that I investigate, as for example words that encourage group participation, inclusive pronouns such as 'we', adjectives that qualify the learning experience as good or bad, sentences that give the students directions on how to complete a task specifically, expressions that show satisfaction or frustration, instructions and so on. But I look at this evidence in context and not on a perspective of 'language transparency', where the words would supposedly carry their meaning independently of the context. My unit of analysis is most of the times a paragraph, but I often narrow down and focus on a particular sentence within that paragraph, and then on the word choices in the sentence etc. I tend to 'zoom into' the data but that is just a way to provide a closer look at the language of the tasks. The data is always making sense to me within the context, and within the totality of the message. The data sometimes is a long email that the tutor is using to explain his/her expectations about how the students should do a certain task. I start by looking at the totality of the message in context (What does it mean? What is the tutor trying to achieve here?), and then I look for particularities at a paragraph level, then sentence level and so on. However, sometimes the data is just a sentence, as was the case at Unis@Digital a few times, particularly in block one of the course. In those cases, I have no choice but taking the sentence as my unit of analysis, but again, always within a relationship with the wider context in which the task is embedded. The data that I draw onto to provide a closer analysis is what I term an *extract*. I use the term *extract* as

nothing else but a particular amount of data (varied in length) that I cut from the broader data and bring into evidence in order to explore particular aspects of language that help me to understand the pedagogical practices better.

I engaged in an iterative process in my data analysis, looking for instances which were representative of the discourses and themes operating in practice. My next step is what I call 'reflection' because I drew on the interviews with team members of both institutions to support my analysis. In reality the interviews were one of my final steps during the data collection, but in terms of analysis I draw on the interviews alongside my discussion of the actual pedagogical practices. The reason is that the interviews provide me with the opportunity to reflect on the continuum 'institutional discourse - actual pedagogical practices', allowing me to explore the thinking process and events that are shaping the attempt to transfer the teaching theories into pedagogical practice. There were five interviews carried out in total, four with Unis@Digital staff members and one with the Syracuse tutor. They were mostly unstructured interviews, as I did not aim to ask the same set of questions to all of the interviewees, and wanted my questions to emerge from what they were telling me. Overall, my aim was to get the interviewees to talk to me about their perceptions of the courses, of the teaching approaches used and of any institutional matters they wished to raise, so I would be able to understand better the contexts in which they were immersed. I point to interview extracts in my analysis, but the full transcribed interviews, translated into English, are presented in the appendices (appendix 2, 5.27-5.30, p. 287-312 and appendix 3, 6.29, p. 323-336).

What I term *data extracts* are pieces of data that I draw on in order to discuss a certain topic. For example, an email or part of an interview is what I term a *data extract*. The data extracts are labelled according to their types.

When I present the data, for purposes of organisation I present the chapter number followed by the number of the extract and what type of data it is (e.g. 5.1 email from the

tutor: chapter five, extract number one, data type *email*). Most data extracts are presented in the appendices of the thesis. The use of bolding in the extracts in the appendices represents my own emphasis to the texts.

Returning to the discussion of the analysis of the themes, I will show in chapters 5 and 6 how these themes emerged from my analysis of the institutional discourse of each case study. During my analysis I chose the particular instances of data that exemplify the instantiation (through language) of these themes that I identified in the literature review and in the discussion of the contexts. I looked for particular instances of data that would help me to explore my research questions. For example, I chose instances of the institutional document and emails at Unis@Digital that were either evidence of these themes or were important parts of the context that was underpinning the pedagogical practices (appendix 2, 5.3, p. 266) where I demonstrated the importance of the role of the 'teacher-facilitator' at Unis@Digital and extract 5.6 (appendix p. 267-268) where I show how this role becomes practice. Both extracts will be discussed in chapter 5.

Meanwhile it is worth noting that the theme *participation*, for example, was very strong at both the Unis@Digital and Syracuse case-studies. From the very beginning there seemed to be an institutional perception in both cases that the more the students engaged online with each other, usually via the discussion forums, the more successful a course was. The students were always prompted to participate in the course in different ways, via the tools offered in the virtual learning environments. Emails, forum messages and portfolios were some of them.

The role of the tutor was another important theme, which appeared prominently in the institutional discourse of the two research settings. Due to the common perception that collaborative learning should be the approach underlying the teaching practices in e-

learning (which I explore in the literature in chapter 2) the role of the tutor was proposed to be the one of a facilitator. Following the premise of collaborative learning, in such an approach the tutor does not teach but supports and guides the students through their learning process. My aim in the analysis is to look at how this role of facilitator is put into practice, given that other teaching discourses and events, not necessarily compatible with this role, are taking place simultaneously.

Finally, I look at how assessment practices are performed. The theme assessment is strong within the institutional discourse of the institutions because it is usually related to the quality control of the courses and to the official recognition of the learning process. The authority of learning is practiced through the assessments.

Below I present a figure that attempts to show the process of data collection, selection and analysis. Although the graph is constructed to be read clockwise, the actual process was iterative. This is simply a visual representation of the main steps taken and an attempt to summarise the narrative presented in this section so far (the repeated numbers on the diagram indicate that the steps were carried out at the same time) :

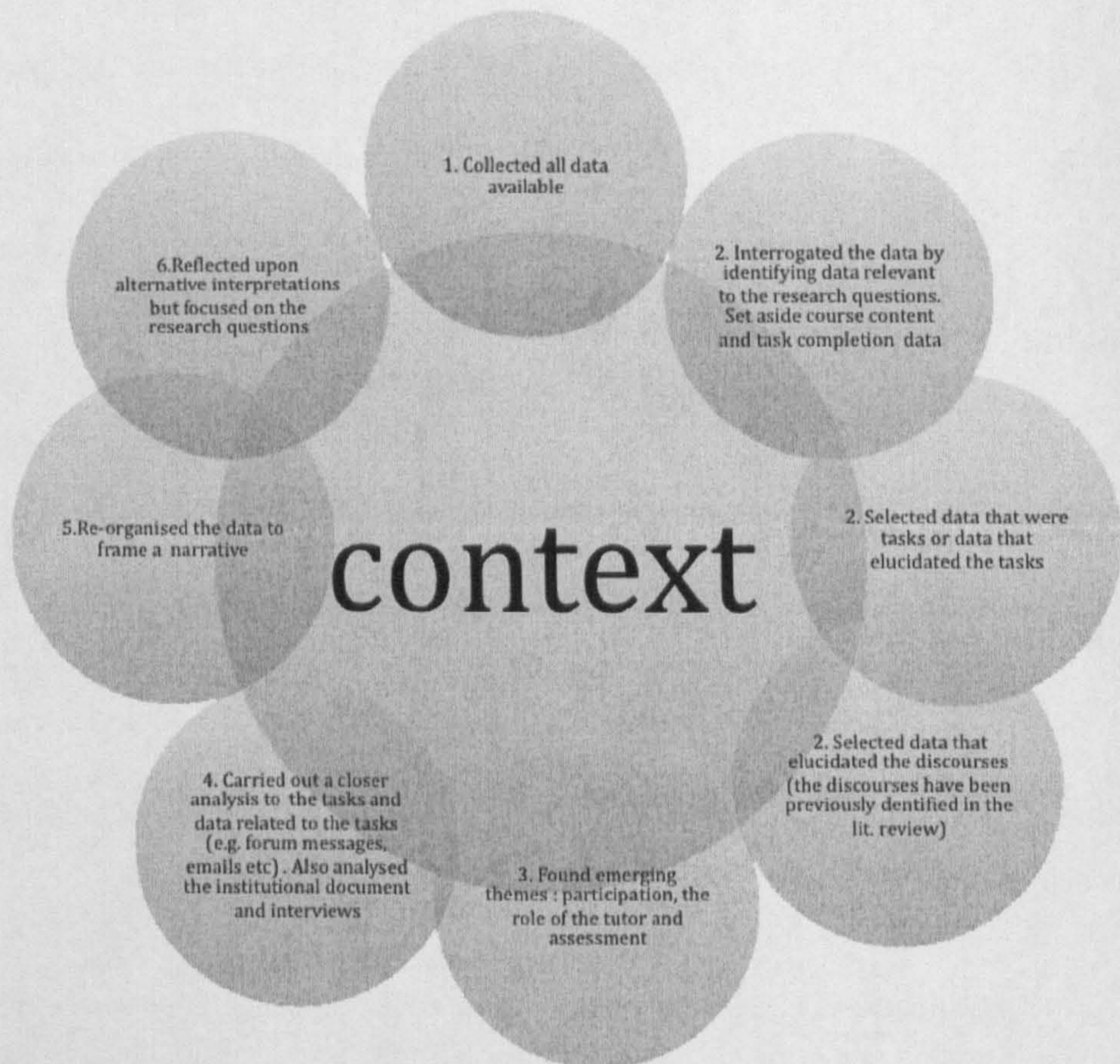


Figure 4.3 - Data selection and analysis process represented clockwise.

In terms of handling the data, the part of the data from Unis@Digital was in Portuguese. In order to present the data in this thesis I translated them into English. However, in order to double check and validate my translations I hired the professional help of an independent English proof-reader who is also proficient in Portuguese. The data in Portuguese is not presented in the appendices due to the fact that if I did so this thesis would exceed the word count allowance. Figure 4.4 below shows a timeline of the data collection and table 4.2 shows the data extracts I present in the appendices:

Figure 4.4 - Timeline of data collection (2004-2005)

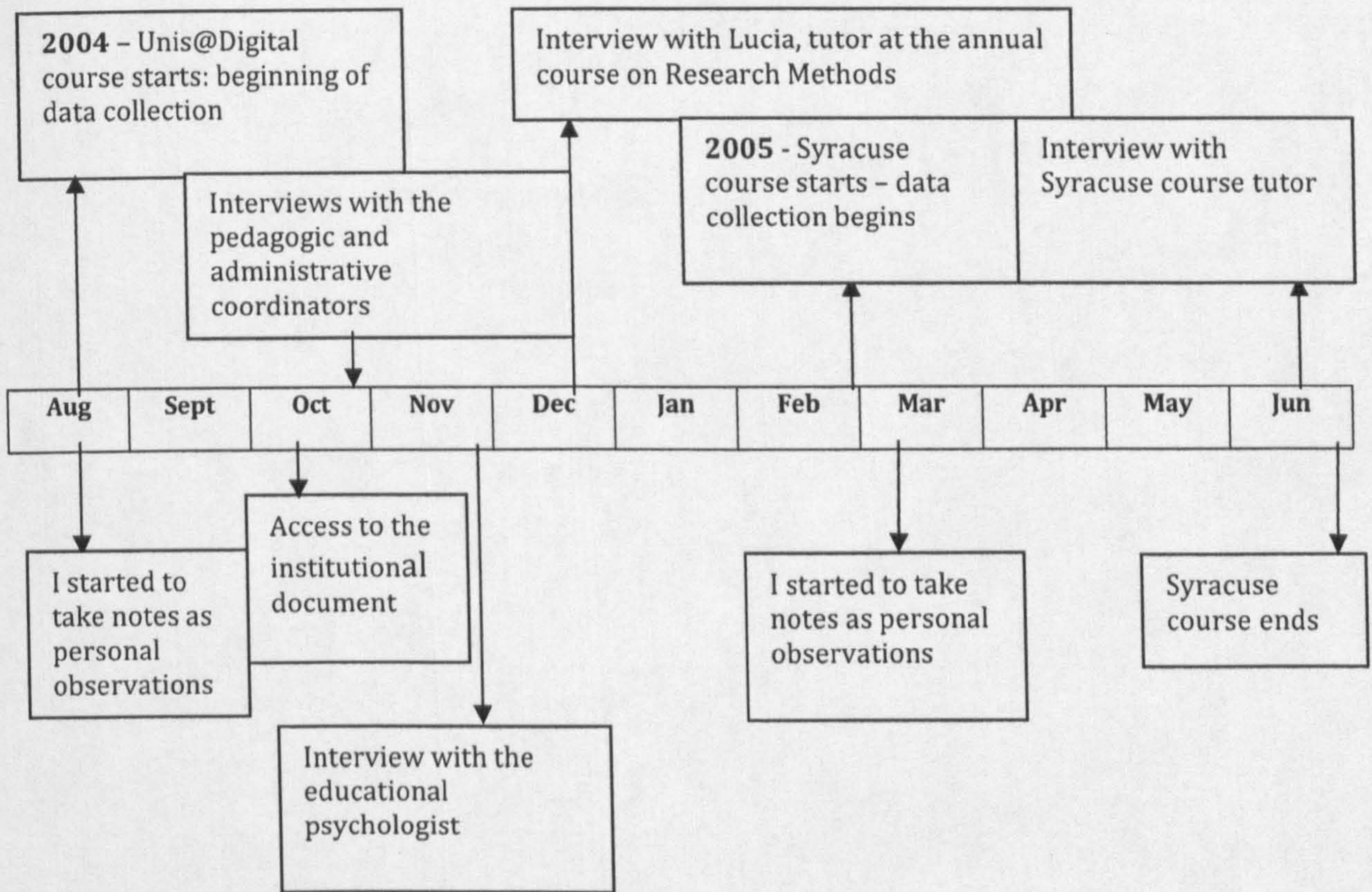


Table 4.2 - Data extracts in the appendices

Data type	Chapter	Label in the appendices	Total
Email	5	5.10 (email from learner); 5.12 (email from tutor to learner); 5.13 (email from course coordinator to learner); 5.14 (email from the tutor to learners); 5.16 (email from learner to tutor); 5.17 email from learner to tutor); 5.18 (email from learner to tutor).	7
	6	None (emails were private)	0
Institutional document	5	From 5.1 to 5.6 and 5.26 (full version of the institutional document)	7 extracts (of 1 document)
	6	None	05.15, 5.19 and 5.20

Data type	Chapter	Label in the appendices	Total
The tasks	4	4.2 and 4.4	2
	5	5.8, 5.15, 5.19 and 5.20	4
	6	6.7-6.16; 6.19-6.25	17
Discussion forum messages	4	4.3 (presented in chapter 4)	1
	5	5.21-5.23	5
	6	6.26 - 6.28	3
Interviews	4	4.1 (extract)	1
	5	5.24, 5.25 (extracts); 5.27-5.30 (full interviews)	6
	6	6.1-6.6; 6.17 and 6.18 (extracts); 6.29 (full interview)	9
Personal observations (samples)	5	5.31	1
	6	6.30	1

4.7 The voices in the case studies

In the previous chapter I discussed the concept of *voice* (section 3.3.2, p. 69). I argued that due to the intertextual nature of all texts it is possible to identify the 'otherness' in the texts: the idea that there are different voices in the language we use daily to interact with people (Bakhtin, 1981). By invoking a voice one invokes other people's point of view. The concept of voice helps me analyse the data to the extent that it enables me to identify instances in course design and interaction between course participants (eg. tutors and students) in which for example, the tutors separate themselves from the task design, or from the institutional discourse, by assuming different voices. Alternatively, the opposite is also true, in many instances these different voices merge as if they were a unique point of view, and it is only because of my insider accounts (of a teacher-researcher and participant observer) that I am able to identify what is going on. Exploring the different voices that are drawn upon during a course enables me to

understand better the roles assumed by the tutor, and the role of the course design, and how these relate to the institutional discourse and other discourses that make the pedagogical practices the way they are. Below I illustrate how these voices tend to appear in the data, as for example, in the language of the tasks:

..The schema made out of the text, as well as the critical summary must be sent to the teacher-facilitator and also a short comment on what the text is about so that the teacher can understand it. (Mark – 0-1 point)

(Extract 4.2 - Task)

The person who wrote this task to the students at Unis@Digital was the course author. I was the course tutor and given the collaborative approach adopted by Unis@Digital my role there was supposed to be the one of a tutor who *facilitated* the course, rather than taught it. I 'teacher-as-researcher' had nothing to do with the way this task was designed, and in fact the task addresses the tutor in the third person, implying that someone else wrote the task. Another example:

Discussion forum question (Unis@Digital):

Talk about the importance of the interpretative reading and what it can mean for your learning process. (Mark: 0-1 point)

(Extract 4.3 Discussion forum question)

In the text of the above task there is no indication of who is writing, and it is therefore probably the context that will lead readers to assume who the author is. In the minds of most students this task was written by me, the course tutor, but it was actually written by the course-author. One may ask what difference it makes whether the course author or the tutor has written the task, or whether these voices or are not clear in the texts. Apparently there is no difference. In fact it is not common for the students to wonder

who wrote the task and why. But in analytical terms in this study, the advantage of identifying voices is that those voices in the texts are connected to the discourses that interplay in e-learning. By evoking a voice one is evoking a point of view, and this point of view operates within a discourse (or various discourses). These discourses underpin the ways in which the tasks are written, through the voices that play specific roles in e-learning practices.

In my data the voices found in the pedagogical practices can be described as follows:

1. The voice of the course-author

This voice is usually related to the institutional discourse because it is often associated with assessment and/or institutional matters such as academic calendars and quality control. It can also be simultaneously related to either the collaborative learning discourse or the didactic discourse, depending on how the task is presented to the learner through the text. For instance, in the example 4.2 above, the voice of the course-author is associated with the institutional discourse because it brings to the fore the theme of assessment, by telling the students that they will receive from 0-1 points if they successfully complete the task. The theme of assessment is part of the institutional discourse, bringing in the implicit idea that successful assessments are the route through which knowledge is formally recognised, that is, it is the route to pass the course and eventually get a certificate that attests one's knowledge. I would also suggest that the course-author is trying to align the task to a collaborative learning paradigm, because it calls the tutor a 'teacher-facilitator'.

2. The voices of the teacher and of the facilitator

The voice of the teacher is linked to the didactic discourse, and the voice of the facilitator, linked to the collaborative learning discourse. By taking up either voice, the tutor will often be operating within these two discourses and can eventually also bring in an institutional perspective - in which case it is difficult to identify a particular voice because the institutional discourse is linked to both didactic and collaborative discourses. In such instance I use the neutral term 'tutor':

The deadline for delivering the assignment is stated in the 'calendar' - 28/11. Assignments received after this date will not be considered for means of assessment.

(Extract 4.4 Task)

In this example the tutor brings in an institutional point of view in terms of the academic calendar.

In this chapter I started by discussing the case-study method and then moved on to explain the contexts of the case studies. I then explained my chronological and thematic approach to data analysis and described the data I gathered, as well as how I decided on what to present. In the next chapter I start the data analysis of case study one, Unis@Digital. I begin by looking at their institutional discourse by focusing on an institutional document, and then I take a closer look at the actual teaching and learning practices.

5 *Case study 1: Unis@Digital*

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, divided into two parts, I present the Unis@Digital case study. In part one I describe the context within which the study took place at Unis@Digital. I present how the course I researched was organised and I also discuss an institutional policy document called “The Institutional Project”. This document describes how the online courses at Unis@Digital were supposed to operate, as well as the driving pedagogic perspectives of the institution.

In part two the actual case study is presented. By ‘case study’ I mean the course itself and the activities that I as a researcher was engaged in while based at Unis@Digital. I draw on a range of different forms of data: institutional policy documents, my personal observations, the language of the tasks and of the general course instructions, email exchanges between the tutor and the students, and discussion forum messages and interviews. In terms of data organisation and analysis, I opted for telling the story of my case studies in this thesis as a narrative, by presenting the accounts chronologically and bringing in different types of data depending on how they help me explore the themes that I found in the institutional document, which I present in part I. I discuss the data by presenting the extracts in the appendices, and label the data according to the types they correspond to and which I discussed in chapter 4 (such as email, personal observation, language of the task etc).

The Unis@Digital data is originally written in Portuguese. For the purpose of data

analysis I have translated the data into English and the translations are presented in the appendices. Independent professional translators have checked my translations.

Part I: The Unis@Digital context

5.2 The course and the setting

The first case study took place at University of Santo Amaro (known as Unisa) in São Paulo, Brazil – or more precisely at Unis@Digital, its online learning department. My fieldwork at Unis@Digital took place in the second academic semester of 2004 (August-December), during which I taught Metodologia Científica (Research Methods) to undergraduate students in their first year of university. At the time I collected my data the department was only two years old, meaning that the courses being offered were quite new to the students. The system at Unis@Digital can be termed blended-learning: students had two face-to-face encounters per semester and two face-to-face exams (with an extra final exam for the students who needed it), but the remainder of the course was delivered and studied online.

I chose to carry out my research at Unis@Digital because of a combination of factors. Firstly because studying online was relatively new in Brazil, and I thought it would be an opportunity to investigate what was influencing course design at that phase, given that a culture regarding how to create courses and how to study online had not yet been fully established; secondly because I used to be a lecturer at Unisa when I lived in Brazil, and I had an offer from the faculty dean to carry out my research there (the faculty dean was my gatekeeper in this circumstance); and finally because the offer enabled me to teach the group for a semester, which I viewed as an excellent opportunity to investigate the course more closely.

I accepted the offer and went to Brazil at the end of June 2004, arriving a week before the course was meant to start. Because of this I did not have much time to go through the course material in advance and to think whether I wanted to change anything in it. In fact, making changes in the way the course was delivered was a possibility offered to me by the pedagogic coordinator responsible for the course, who was also the course author. Her name was Ms Maria Delanhos¹¹, who had earlier been my colleague when I was part of Unisa's staff. The agreement Maria and I reached was that I would teach the course as it was originally designed in its first half (until the first assessment), and would then have the possibility of making changes to it for the presentation of the second half. I was granted permission to change the tasks but not the content or the assessment structure (which was a written face-to-face exam, subject to the university's policies).

I was offered a desk in the open-plan office of Unis@Digital, whereas the other tutors generally worked from home. I had a computer and a telephone line at my disposal, as well as full access to the intranet and a dedicated email account. I believe that this kind of support was very important for my data collection, because I could follow what happened at an institutional level on a daily basis and make my personal observation notes. I shared an office with some key Unis@Digital staff: the pedagogic coordinator, Mrs Maria Delanhos (who in this instance was also the course author); the educational psychologist, Mrs Sara Figueiroa; the administrative coordinator, Mrs Francisca Meirelles; a tutor called Ms Lucia Geraldina (although she was not in the office every day); and the web designer, Mr Ricardo Eladir. Their responsibilities were as follows (based on the institutional document):

¹¹ All names are fictitious.

- **Mrs Maria Delanhos (pedagogic coordinator):** to evaluate systematically the activities of Unis@Digital, proposing changes and suggesting actions that aim to achieve a theoretical, technical, ethical and political quality. To approve course projects and research according to their strength in the following aspects: methodological and theoretical, technical and scientific, physical and financial, and also according to their timetable for completion and relevance. Projects should then be directed for final approval by the Superior University Council;
- **Mrs Sara Figueiroa (educational psychologist):** to support authors, tutors and students in the process of teaching and learning. To assess the content for interaction and appropriateness for Unis@Digital;
- **Mrs Francisca Meirelles (administrative coordinator):** To aid and support the academic and technological coordination in terms of the conceptualisation and implementation of the Programmes and Projects;
- **Ms Lucia Geraldina (teacher-facilitator of another online group of the Research Methods course):** To support, guide and motivate the student, as well as to mark the activities and assess their progress;
- **Mr Ricardo Eladir (web designer):** To prepare the layout of the webpages, to monitor the development of the courses and to update the course programme.

These different roles at Unis@Digital often overlapped in terms of how they impacted on course design. The pedagogic coordinator had overall responsibility for the courses at Unis@Digital and looked at different aspects of course design, such as how they matched the syllabus, how well the tasks were designed, and whether the teaching approaches used by the authors were appropriate to the methodological philosophy of the institution. Likewise, the role of the educational psychologist was also to assist authors in designing the course task and choosing the most appropriate teaching approaches, although clearly she adopted a more psychological perspective. Based on their job descriptions and on what they did in practice, there did not seem to be much difference between their roles. In personal communications with them I noticed they worked from a very similar perspective on how the course design should be approached

at the institution. Their job titles were differentiated mostly because of their academic background: one of them was a pedagogue whereas the other was an educational psychologist. Also, in terms of institutional hierarchy, one was more senior than the other (the pedagogic coordinator was more senior than the educational psychologist).

These job descriptions were stated in a document called “The Institutional Project”, a policy document developed for the accreditation of Unis@Digital as an online distance education provider, in addition to its traditional face-to-face higher education provision. In this thesis I will refer to this document as the ‘institutional document’. More about this document¹² follows in section 5.3 of this chapter.

5.3 The institutional document: accrediting distance education at Unis@Digital

The institutional document, as previously mentioned, is a policy document developed at Unis@Digital to support the institutional case for the accreditation of its online distance education courses by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC). The document discusses in detail the vision of Unis@Digital and how they planned to implement their online courses. It includes everything from expenditure and budgeting to the actual ways in which courses should be presented methodologically. The document does not focus on the Research Methods course specifically but is a generic document applicable to all courses offered by the institution. Its audience was external, mostly MEC assessors that were commissioned to visit the universities to check their processes and commitment to offer high quality distance education. The presentation of a document like this to the MEC committee was one of the various items required for the accreditation process. I obtained this document by chance towards the end of my

¹² The institutional document is not presented in full in the appendices in order not to exceed the word count limit of this thesis, which is 100,000 words.

studies at Unis@Digital, when having an informal chat with Maria. It was the only policy document I became aware of regarding about Unis@Digital aims and methods.

They did not give me any printed guidelines or training course before I started facilitating the course, although towards the end of my research time I realised they offered a course for new tutors. I wondered whether this was because they knew I already had some experience in teaching online, or because they might even have assumed that by coming from the Open University UK I would already have that kind of knowledge on how to teach online, given that in Brazil the Open University UK is a well known distance-education institution. What I had instead were informal conversations on how the courses would normally run, concentrating on timescales, aspects of the face-to-face exams, and on some institutional matters such as the difficulty of convincing some of the teaching staff and the students that studying online could provide a rewarding learning experience, not in detriment of a face-to-face course.

It was only when reading this institutional document that I found out that Unis@Digital was meant to offer a course for new tutors and authors in order to prepare them to use a virtual web-based environment for teaching and learning purposes. One particular section in the document (appendix 5.1, p. 265) gave me a good insight into the methodological framework that was underpinning the design and presentation of courses at Unis@Digital.

This section of the document mentions a *multidisciplinary team*, which consisted of the members of staff I mentioned previously. The team was described as multidisciplinary due to the variety of their academic backgrounds and areas of work. In terms of the national legislation for distance education at the time, there was no specific requirement for a multidisciplinary team to be directing the activities of any distance education institution. Thus, it seems that Unis@Digital had established this would be the case for

them out of their own choice and taken an independent decision based on concern with the quality of the courses they were offering. A multidisciplinary team in charge of Unis@Digital was perceived by staff as a very positive initiative, due to the diverse expertise the team could offer to both tutors and students.

The document also points to the importance of technology in their distance education courses. It emphasises that there needs to be an understanding of the technological medium in which the courses would be offered, and an understanding of the extent to which new behavioural and communicative models needed to be established. I find this section particularly interesting because later on, when I present my data in this chapter, it will be possible to see how, despite this document's recognition of the need for changes in traditional practices for teaching and learning online, what happens in practice is very similar to what happens within a face-to-face model of teaching. For example, the document compares the role of the teaching material in a distance-education course with the role a teacher would assume in a face-to-face classroom environment, by arguing that the teaching material should 'supplement' the functions of a teacher in the classroom (appendix 5.2, p. 265).

The course material, according to this document, assumes the responsibilities that in other circumstances would be granted to the teacher: motivate, inform, assess and control. To a certain extent the course material is supposed to replicate the traditional role of a teacher in a face-to-face traditional classroom environment. The responsibilities were transferred from the teacher to the course material, leaving the teacher with a newly-defined role: a teacher-facilitator. The teacher-facilitator's role is one of supervising the students, motivating them, adapting activities, encouraging debate and assessing the acquisition of knowledge (appendix 5.3, p. 266).

The new name given to the teacher involved in these online courses, *teacher-facilitator*, denotes the principles underlying teaching and learning online at Unis@Digital. The

term teacher-facilitator presents an interesting view of how the role of the tutor is perceived at the institution, a combination of *teacher* and *facilitator*. The term used in Portuguese was “professor-orientador”, which in English would translate as a “teacher-guide”; the term *guide* being more appropriately translated as known in the literature, a *facilitator*. At Unis@Digital, however, they did not stop making use of the name ‘teacher’, but instead created a new compound word to indicate the fusion of a new role for the teacher into the existing one, that of being a guide. It seems they did not want to disassociate the teacher from the traditional role, but at the same time wanted to change this traditional role by adding the dimension of the *facilitator*. In the description provided of the role of the teacher, however, as presented above, the teacher was not usually described as the one who should ‘teach’. Instead the teacher is now the teacher-facilitator, and should act according to their new title by guiding, supervising, stimulating and facilitating the learning process in different ways. The teacher-facilitator role at Unis@Digital does not come across as less important than the traditional role of a teacher, but simply different, with some duties added (such as to provide support via the VLE) and some other duties changed (such as the way of teaching, which in this case should be more facilitative than expositive).

Unis@Digital’s description of the role of the tutor is in line with Dillenbourg’s (1999) definition of the new role of the teacher, where ‘the teacher is named a facilitator because the idea is not to provide the right answer but to perform a minimal pedagogical intervention’ (chapter 2, section 2.3, p. 29).

At Unis@Digital however, although this role is made clear in the job description of the teacher-facilitator, the mere fact that the name ‘teacher’ is not withdrawn from the context implies that certain roles of the traditional teacher still remained. Indeed, the Institutional document mentions that one of the roles of the teacher-facilitator would be:

To assess the acquisition, construction and re-construction of information and knowledge by the student, and their participation and investment in the course

(from appendix 5.3, p. 266).

The teacher-facilitator was supposed to *assess* the students' knowledge *acquisition*, a role in line with a traditional view of the teacher and with a traditional view of the learner *acquiring knowledge*. At the same time this view is combined with a view of the teacher *assessing* the *construction and reconstruction* of information and knowledge. In this latter case this view corresponds to a constructivist view of learning in which students learn through collaboration with others. In both cases, however, the teacher 'assesses' the knowledge of the student, and perhaps that is the main characteristic for the teacher that remained in line with their traditional role. Nevertheless, there is an element of power in the teacher-facilitator's role in either case, which is to assess. Unis@Digital seems therefore to be trying to combine the *traditional* role of the teacher with this *new* role of the teacher advocated by a socio-constructivist view of learning. The document, however, in trying to align itself with a more socio-constructivist view of teaching and learning, in many instances still presents this traditional view of teaching, revealing an intrinsic confusion and complexity in relation to the teachers' role in this mode of education at the institution.

There is also an evident contradiction in the document, or at least something that required further thinking. In the extract 5.2 in the appendix (p. 265), it is said that the role of assessing and controlling the learners should be a task embedded in the course materials. It sounds an odd idea to think of teaching material 'assessing' the students, but if the course tasks are thought of as part of the course materials then it is possible.

The teaching material in the course I taught was not written by the tutor but by a course author. This person tried to embed in the tasks ways in which the successful completion

of these tasks would count towards the students' final assessment. This was easily done by adding to each course task a *mark*. For example, by completing task 1 the students would be able to get anything between 0-1 point (e.g. 0.5 was allowed) towards their final grade depending on how well they completed the task (assessed by the teacher-facilitator). This will be much clearer when I show the tasks in part II of this chapter, but it is an illustration of this strange capability of the course material to 'assess' and 'control' the students at Unis@Digital.

Actually, it was not the teaching material that was assessing and controlling the students' learning but the course author through her voice coming through the teaching materials. In such instances the voice of the course author seemed to be replacing the role of the teacher in assessment. Nevertheless, the teacher-facilitator in this case still needs to assess the students' performance, because it is the teacher-facilitator who will decide whether to award half a point or an entire point to the student's task. What this shows is the hidden combined work of the teacher-facilitator and the course author to achieve a mark for the student's completed task. The course author defines the range of the marks that can be awarded and the tutor decides how much to award the student within that scale. Instead of being the content to be learned the teaching material seems to become the tutor itself. What implicitly lies behind this idea is that the course material represents the learning ideal of the person who writes it, the course author. In part two of this chapter one of the things that I propose doing is to investigate how this contradiction manifests itself in practice.

Still in relation to the role of the tutor in the Institutional document, there is a technological role as well in relation to what the teacher-facilitator should do:

To act responsibly, critically and in a committed manner in this new way of teaching, bearing in mind its complexity and specificity in a technological society; [...]

(from appendix 5.3, p. 266).

The paragraph above is challenging to understand, because one might wonder what 'acting responsibly' or 'critically' and in a 'committed manner' mean in this context. The only way I can try to understand what is meant here is by drawing on my own experience as a tutor at Unis@Digital. They always encouraged me to support the learners on their journey on getting used to studying online. They also encouraged me to bring the students into the virtual environment to perform most of the activities required by the course. Their implicit view, which I noticed through my personal communications with Unis@Digital staff, was that the more things are happening within the virtual environment, the more successful the course would appear to be to the institution.

In terms of acting responsibly and committedly in relation to the technological society, what it meant for me is that my role as a teacher-facilitator also involved convincing the students to embrace this new mode of study by helping them to locate content within the platform, to use the tools competently, and to access and navigate through the course as a whole. The multidisciplinary team available at Unis@Digital consisted of a web designer and an administrative coordinator, plus two professionals whose tasks of guiding the students through the platform were shared with the teacher-facilitator (the pedagogic coordinator and the educational psychologist). In any case, the teacher-facilitator seemed to be the first point of contact for the student for any matter related to course access and navigation, except in the rare cases in which the course was totally offline, for example, due to the website being down for maintenance.

In such circumstances the web developer would contact the students by email and let them know of the maintenance issues. The students tended to contact the teacher-

facilitator first, not because they did not know of the alternative personnel they could speak to within the team, but because it seemed to feel natural for them to first approach the teacher-facilitator and then, if needed, to look for other sources of help.

In addition to the more traditional role of the teacher being responsible for assessing the students' learning and motivating them, the role of the teacher-facilitator at Unis@Digital is cumulative and distributed: the teacher is responsible for both motivating and facilitating the students' learning as well as helping them have a good experience in relation to studying online. This would happen by the teacher-facilitator assuming responsibility for mediating the student experience with the virtual platform, with the course itself, with other learners, and with their own personal life:

To reduce the impact of physical, geographical and temporal distances, promoting media-student, student-course, student-tutor, student- student, and student-real life experience [...]

(appendix 5.3, p. 266).

The role of the tutor as stated above seems much more complex than suggested by the literature on collaborative learning presented in chapter two. Although in chapter two the complexity of using collaborative learning in e-learning is addressed, what does not seem to be directly addressed is this mediation role that the tutor seems to inherit with this new mode of education, which involves being a technology expert (in terms of dealing with the platform and teaching students how to use it); a psychologist of learning, able to motivate the students in this new educational mode; and also a person capable of helping to bridge the gap between the students' personal life experience and their online courses.

5.4 The theoretical thinking underpinning the teaching approach

The Institutional document presents the theoretical perspectives underpinning the practices at Unis@Digital, which is based upon the understanding that learning happens through a '(re)construction of knowledge' (see appendix 5.4, p. 266).

Extract 5.4 refers to the use of multimedia resources to help promote interaction and dynamism in the relationship between tutors and learners. In this sense the use of technology and the course materials to promote interaction between participants, is an important aspect of their proposed approach. They mention a '(re)construction of knowledge', which implies a constructivist view of learning as discussed in chapter two. The Institutional document follows to confirm this, with a section on 'Interaction in the distance education process', in which the importance of 'interaction' is raised and Vygotsky's theory that learning is a social process is mentioned (appendix 5.5, p. 267).

Extract 5.5 introduces this *Vygotskyan* approach to teaching and learning online to the Unis@Digital teaching and learning philosophy. This view, as discussed in chapter two, sustains a socio-constructivist view of learning, which is the basis for the popular collaborative learning approach. Therefore one could assume that the teaching and learning principles of Unis@Digital will be mostly based on the collaborative learning approach. Although the term 'collaborative learning approach' has not been mentioned *per se* as yet in the document, the idea of *interaction* can be perceived as a related term when referring to collaboration. The word *interaction* in the e-learning literature is used to indicate different types of engagement (such as in human-computer interaction; student-content interaction, student-tutor interaction), but I draw on the work of Garrison and Anderson (2003) in an attempt to define the term in the context of this thesis.

Building on the work of Dewey (1938), which supports the idea that society and individual cannot exist separately, Garrison and Anderson (2003) describe interaction as what “unifies the subjective (personal) and objective (social) worlds in an immediate timeframe” (2003:13). They argue that through interaction ideas are communicated and knowledge is constructed and confirmed. The view of interaction they present is in line with a collaborative approach to learning. In this view interaction can happen between all the aspects I mentioned above (student-computer ; student-content; student-student and student-tutor). In Portuguese, the word *interaction* (*interatividade*), in the context of e-learning, seems to be frequently used to indicate students learning from each other, by doing course tasks together and by exchanging messages in discussion forums. It is also used to indicate the engagement between the students and the VLE.

In the contexts in which it has been used at Unis@Digital, *interaction* often seems to overlap with the term *participation*, although they are not the same in principle. Participation, in my case studies, refers to the online presence of the learner in the VLE, that is, how much the learner engages with the tasks, be they individual or collaborative tasks. Because most of the tasks are designed to be collaborative in both case-studies, the term participation will, therefore, commonly refer to the engagement of the learners with collaborative tasks – hence the overlap with the term *interaction*. The collaborative learning discourse appears to construct learning in terms of *interaction* whereas in my case studies it is done around the term *participation*.

Unis@Digital’s document mentions several times the importance of *interaction* and of the *(re) construction of knowledge*. Both terms imply practices that are at the core of the collaborative learning approach. Further in the document however, a more explicit reference to collaboration is given, by using the term ‘collaborative work’ (appendix 5.6, p. 267-268).

Again, the terms *interaction* and *(re) construction of knowledge* appear in appendix 5.6 (p. 269) of the document to describe the intentions behind promoting the student-student and student-facilitator synchronous or asynchronous contact. More explicitly however is the reference to the '*collaborative work*' that the course participants are expected to undertake. Unis@Digital has therefore positioned itself within a paradigm for teaching and learning that is in line with my discussion in chapter two of the *social turn* in education referring to a move from *individual work* to *collaborative work* (from the individual to the collective, see chapter 2, p. 19).

The next step in the document is to present a table with a schedule of time allocated for the tutor-facilitator in relation to each group of 50 students, in courses with 50 study hours:

Table 5.1 - From the institutional document

<i>Synchronous</i>	Work hours per semester
Chat	1 chat of 50 minutes – 1 per subject, for a group of approx. 15 students in each chat. Total - 9hrs/student per semester
Telephone	15 hours of teaching time allocated at pre-set timetables
Classroom session and test	20 hours, depending on the semester
<i>Asynchronous</i>	
Individual activities	60 hours
Group work	30 hours
Email	15 hours
Forum	20 hours
<i>Total study hours per semester</i>	174 hours; 8 hrs/student each week

Although the teaching approach at Unis@Digital is said to be based upon constructivist and socio-interactionist perspectives of learning, which focus on collaboration between course participants, the table above presents some discrepancies with the proposed

approach. From a total of 174 study hours per semester, the table suggests that the students are supposed to spend 60 hours doing individual activities as opposed to 30 hours doing collaborative activities (group work). If we add 15hrs of email interaction with the tutor plus 15hrs of telephone interaction it makes 30hrs of further interaction between student-tutor only. It corresponds to 90 hours of the course (individual activities + student-tutor/ multidisciplinary team interaction), which is more than half of the total amount of study hours in the course. According to this data it is already possible to expect that the course offered by Unis@Digital which I will analyse in the next part of this chapter will not be as collaborative and interactive as their documented approach seems to suggest.

So far the Institutional document has pointed out a few characteristics that the courses offered by Unis@Digital should present: being *interactive*, by establishing *collaborations* between participants; being *interactive* by establishing *contact* between the teacher-facilitator and the student (*communication*), and being *interactive* in relation to the use of the technological interface that the students will have access to during the course. Therefore, one of my categories of analysis in part II will be *interaction*, focusing on these three aspects as described above.

I now move on to discussing the interface used at Unis@Digital (TelEduc) and how the course was presented on it.

5.5 The course content and the interface

My aim in providing an overview of the course content here is to aid a better understanding of the tasks to follow. Understanding the task instructions outside the context of the course presentation can be challenging and, although my aim is not to

assess the content itself or the students' performance in the tasks, I believe that a general overview of the course content is a valuable source of contextual information.

TelEduc, the online environment used at Unis@Digital, is an open source platform developed by a Brazilian university. All the course content was available in the platform, and the students did not have printed materials or books that accompanied the course. Even the study guide was available only online. This contradicts the institutional document, which argues that the students would receive a study guide as printed material, as well as an activity book, in addition to the course content offered digitally in the platform (for a full list of resources see appendix 5.23, p. 275, section 3, *teaching material*). The implications of this is that, given the fact the students were new to e-learning, they were not quite sure how to navigate in the platform to find such information, and it would take some time for the students to become familiar with using it for their studies. As a result, as I will show in part II of this chapter, the students did not access the course environment until well beyond the official course start date.

As extract 5.6 shows, the only printed materials the students were supposed to receive related to the *interaction student-institution*. This is another level of interaction described as important in the institutional document.

In terms of the course itself, the Research Methods course at Unis@Digital was offered in two terms (which corresponded together to one semester), from mid-June to mid-December 2004. It was divided into two big blocks, which were called 'Eixos Temáticos Norteadores' (ETN). In English the translation of ETN is not straightforward; it means something like 'Thematic Units around a Subject' or content blocks. These ETNs, from now on will be called simply *blocks*.

Block one was entitled 'A Arte de Estudar, A Função da Universidade e a Prática da Ciência enquanto Saber' (The Art of Studying, The Purpose of the University and the Practice of Science as Knowledge). Within this block, the content was:

- Methods and study strategies
- How to study in an effective way
- How to retain the acquired knowledge
- What is science and what is its use
- The different types of existing 'knowledge'
- The literature review

The purpose of this block, as presented in the course environment to the students, is to introduce them to some study strategies, such as how to summarise, underline important ideas and time management. It also introduces the students to the concept of a literature review and its use in scientific assignments and research. In this block the students also studied what they called the 'levels of knowledge', denominated as Popular (or Common-sense), Scientific, Theological and Philosophical. In personal conversation with the course author, she claimed that her aim was to develop in the student a sense of an investigative nature, by developing their capacities to respond adequately to cultural, political, socio and economical problems.

The title of block two was 'Do Conhecimento Adquirido, à Reflexão e à Prática (From Acquired Knowledge, to Reflection and Practice). The content of this block was:

- Reflecting about the different forms of knowledge acquired
- The development of technical-scientific investigations by the researcher
- The practice of doing technical-scientific assignments

In this block the goal was to focus on important aspects of the 'research act', such as the delimitation of the research problem, aims and objectives and the theoretical framework – these are the conceptual systems and theories that support a

dissertation/thesis. It also focused on both qualitative and quantitative types of research, explaining their differences, data collection methods and other research techniques.

In terms of course format, the main pages of the course had a standard navigation bar on the left side with a tab entitled 'estrutura do ambiente' (a), meaning 'environment structure'. This tab directed the students to some generic explanation of how the course environment worked. By clicking there the students could find information about all the features of the platform including how to use the chat system and the discussion forum. The page below is entitled 'dinâmica do curso' (course dynamic) and there the students found detailed guidelines on how they were expected to study the course: by making the time to participate in the activities and by taking part in the discussion forum and chats. This area is called 'Disciplinas on-line: dicas para o sucesso' (b). In English it means 'Online disciplines: tips for success':

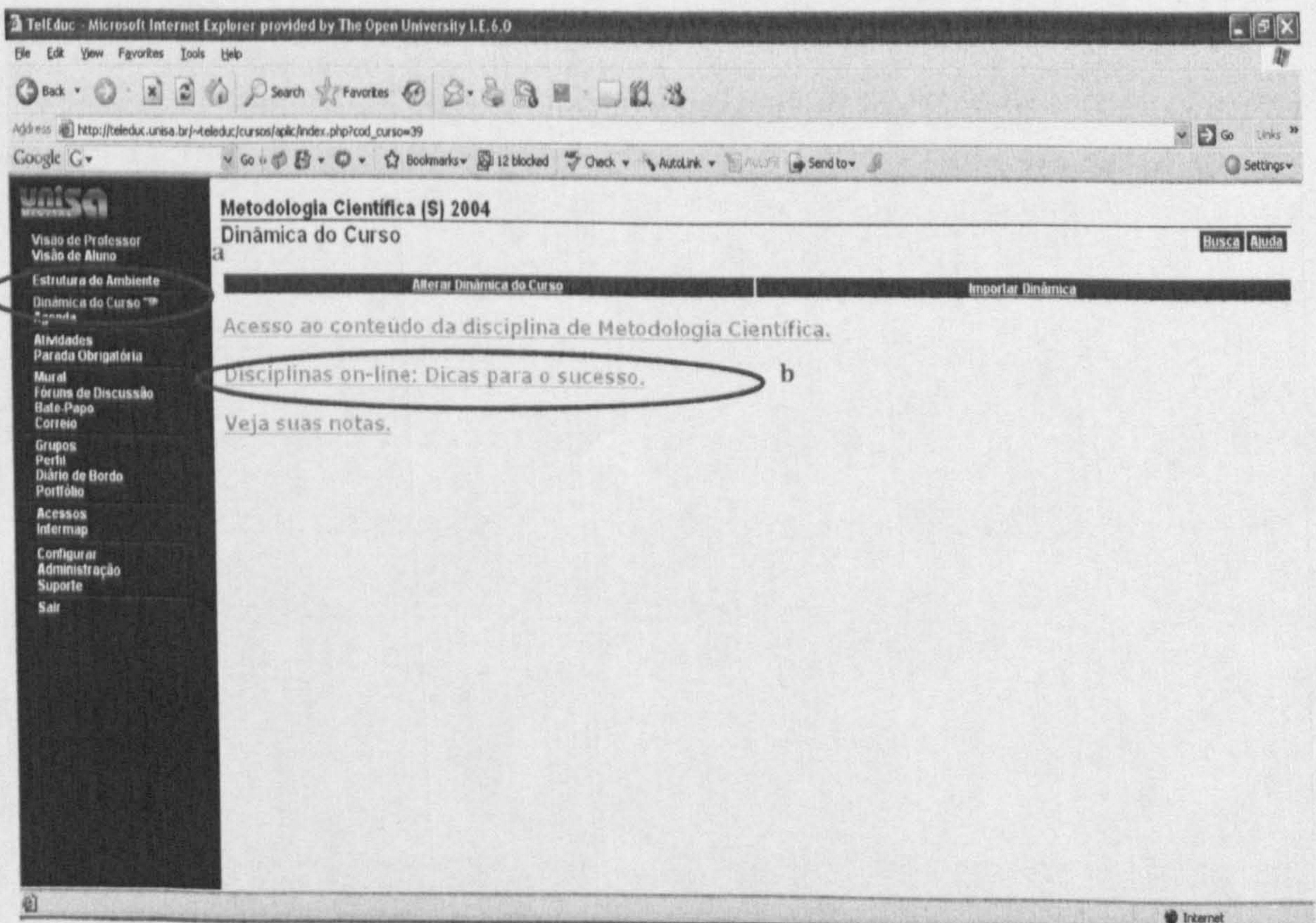


Figure 5.1 - Unisa course home page: tips for success

When clicking in area (b) the students found guidelines on how to study in collaboration with the peer learners. This was called 'interaction' (see appendix 5.8, p. 273). The text in 5.8 brings in the idea that collaboration between the students should be sustained throughout the course and that this would aid a better learning process. This thinking is in line with what the institutional document proposes. However, the support groups mentioned above did not exist in practice. The students tended to find it really difficult to interact online with other course participants, as the data in part II will show.

In addition, in the institutional document, the types of interaction presented did not include *student-content*, but *student-institution*. The interaction student-institution is not discussed in the *tips for success*, although it will be a very important type of interaction during the course. This is one of the mismatches between what is in the document and what actually is said to the student.

In both blocks of the course the students were expected to participate in the chats and in the follow-up discussion forums, which aimed to focus on the main issues discussed during the chat sessions. The screenshot below shows the notices in the 'noticeboard' area of the course. There is a message asking the students to participate in the 'discussion forum of the first chat'. It was posted by me because I had been asked by the course coordinator to redirect the students to the discussion forum whenever I could throughout the course.

Figure 5.2 - Course noticeboard: encouraging students' participation

When the students opened this message they found the following text:

"Hi everyone. After our first chat session, which by the way was a success, we will discuss the main issues raised in the discussion forum. Do participate!
Regards,
Prof. Andreia"

(5.9 Discussion forum message)

It was common practice at Unis@Digital to use the noticeboard as a tool to encourage students to visit other areas in the course environment and to do certain activities. Even if the main tasks of the block were designed to be answered individually; the students would still be asked to join the chat and afterwards the discussion forum to discuss the theme as a group. The premise that collaboration aids better learning underlies most of the tasks in the course. Although collaborative learning was not always explicit in the course tasks, the activities were always rooted in a collaborative learning intention, which was materialised in many cases by directing the students to the chat and discussion forum. It was taken for granted that the course should enable the students to

interact in various ways, and the course coordinator always encouraged the tutors to make use of these virtual-learning environment tools to provide learner engagement during the course. There is a lot of emphasis in the role of the technology mediating the learning process. The expectation was that collaborative learning was an essential part of the learning process and that it was intrinsic to the online study mode. Embedded in the structure of the virtual-learning environment, the discussion forum and chat were the main tools used to foster collaboration between the students.

5.6 Main themes emerging from the context

The institutional document, although not usually shared with the teacher-facilitator at Unis@Digital, brings to the fore the underlying pedagogical thinking of the institution. The main ideas presented in the document relate to how learners are expected to *interact* with the different elements of the course: the teacher-facilitator, other students, the technology and the institution. *Interaction* seems to be at the core of the practices at Unis@Digital, and this being the case, interaction is one of my categories of data analysis as previously mentioned.

Another important aspect is the *role of the tutor*. This seems to have changed from a traditional, didactic role (the role of the one who teaches), to a more fluid, participatory role of the tutor *as a guide*. Nevertheless, the tutor at Unis@Digital still keeps some of the characteristics of a traditional teachers' role, in which the assessment is a very important part. Therefore *the role of the tutor* and how *assessment* is performed will be two further categories of data analysis in part II. My aim is to see how what has been said in the Institutional document maps on to the real teaching and learning practices of Unis@Digital in the case I study.

Part II: The Course

5.7 The data

In this part of the chapter I present the course and attempt to analyse the data according to the main themes that emerged from the Institutional document in part I: participation, the role of the tutor, and assessment. These themes overlap in the data; making it difficult to separate them for the purpose of analysis. For this reason, I analyse the data by *chronological order*, and discuss each of the three themes interchangeably, as they appear throughout the course by drawing on different types of data.

By different *types of data* I mean personal observations, the institutional document, emails, the language of the tasks, interviews and personal communications. These constitute the range of data I draw upon in order to do the analysis in this study. The personal observations, for example, are a type of data that appear throughout the analysis. They can, however, be identified in the text whenever the first person singular is used, although this is not limited to these instances. Most of the time I will be writing as a researcher and not as a tutor, so I will be using the third-person singular to refer to the teacher-facilitator. Similarly, the institutional document *as data* will be referred to throughout the analysis in this part II, as an element of comparison between the teaching methods expected *in academic theory* and what happens *in the pedagogical practice*.

5.8 Unis@Digital – course block 1

Most of the group and individual communication in the course was made via the notices and mail areas of TelEduc, but occasionally emails composed outside of TelEduc, such as

in our private email accounts, were also sent. The types of email I present in course block one are either individual or group emails which relate to the general progress of the course, and aim at informing the students of exam dates and other institutional types of communication. For ethical reasons and due to the private nature of emails I only use those for which I received verbal consent from the students. In most cases I was using either the *notices* or *email channels* to raise the students' awareness of what was going on in the course - as, for example, in terms of the calendar dates, assessment plans, and general course access issues. I tended to use them interchangeably and for this reason I chose to put them together as data types.

Due to this being the students' first experience of studying online at Unis@Digital, they did not know what to expect. They were not familiar with the concept of a virtual learning environment. They needed guidance for every single step of the course, from how to access the course page to how to study online. This help was offered both by the teacher-facilitator and by the Unis@Digital technical and coordination team. These roles were often overlapping as shown by the email on the appendices (5.10, p. 270) that was sent from the tutor's private mail account (generic tool, Unisa mail) to the students a week after the official start date of the course.

The email was sent aiming to serve mostly as a reminder to the students that the course had officially started - it was sent by me as a result of a request from Francisca, the course administrator. It had been a week into the course, and many of the students had not accessed the course environment yet. This delayed the deadlines for some activities, including the delivery of the activities of block 1, as stated above. Nevertheless, the university's calendar was followed as expected.

At Unis@Digital the students had to be introduced to the idea of studying online and everything it entails (such as how to access the course, how to keep up with assignment deadlines etc). Because of this, the role of the tutor, from the very beginning, became a

mix of various tasks: from doing administrative work and being a technical adviser, to being a motivator for course participation.

The idea of technology mediating and shaping the practice appears in the teacher-facilitator's email. The tutor is assuming various roles in an attempt to prompt course participation. It is important to note that *interaction*, as stated in the policy document, is very often translated into practice as *participation*. In the end of the email the tutor 'calls for participation' in the course – and participation was perceived at Unis@Digital as a form of interaction between the students and the various course elements (e.g. other students, platform, teacher-facilitator, content etc). From now on, my use of the term participation is interchangeable with the various forms of *interaction* as stated in the policy document. The Institutional document states that interaction plays a crucial role in the teaching and learning process (appendix 5.5, p. 267). Based on Vygotskyan principles, the document perceives interaction as a human phenomenon, and acknowledges it as being inherently complex.

After being at Unis@Digital for a week my practices drew on fully embedded discourses that were circulating there, for example in terms of understanding how offering face-to-face encounters was a requirement of the legislation; in terms of showing the students the importance of 'participating' in the course environment (as a result of the numerous informal conversations I had had with the pedagogical coordinator and educational psychologist); in terms of helping learners to overcome their digital literacy gap to follow an online course because they were not used to this mode of study and the list could go on. It seems to me that their institutional discourse became part of my own practice. This can be perceived as my own 'institutionalisation' process, despite the fact that I was trying to be reflexive about my own practice and had a researcher role attached to me at the same time I was a tutor.

The naturalization and appropriation processes of the various voices embedded in the texts by the speaker (in this case, me) is one of the ways in which discourses interplay and merge, at the same time being a way in which the unproblematisation of practices start to happen. The discourse and voices merge in such a dynamic that they become embedded in the practices (and vice-versa), and from this perspective they start to be replicated in the practices of different individuals. Wetherell (2001) summarizes this in relation to the concepts of language and voice in Bakhtin. She says:

“[...] talk is dialogical, meaning that when we speak we combine together many different pieces of other conversations and texts and, significantly, other voices. We are often quoting. Sometimes this quoting is marked as when we say ‘he said...then he said...’ but often it is indirect and unmarked as people take over the voices of others.”

(Wetherell, 2001:24)

This Bakhtinian concept that a given voice is dialogically constituted was discussed in chapter 3 (p. 69), and it is an important concept for reflection in terms of the data throughout the analysis, in order to try to understand the complexities of the practices in e-learning. For example, in this instance the voice of the teacher embedded in the text aims to establish *order* in the relationship tutor-student and the roles attached to each of them. There was an attempt to separate the tutoring role of the teacher from the technological role of the web team at Unis@Digital:

“If you have any problems related to accessing the online course, please send an email to *unisadigital@unisa.br* or call 5545-8600”.

(Extract from email from the tutor to the students, appendix 2, 5.10, p. 270)

It was indeed the case that technology, as a mediating artifact in the course, had a direct impact on the establishment of the relationships between the ones involved in the learning process, as the Institutional document mentions. Through this email, the tutor

plays the role of a technological adviser from the very first contact with the students, although there was a conscious concern in re-directing this role to the technical staff of Unis@Digital.

The institutional document presents the perspective that the tutor should “act responsibly, critically and in a committed manner in this new way of teaching, bearing in mind the complexity and specificity of a technological society” (appendix 5.3, p. 266). It seems to me that the tutor, by assuming an administrative, technological and motivational¹³ role simultaneously as the email above shows, is being in line with the target of acting committedly in relation to the learners in a technological society, where complexity seems to be a key word. By dialogically and ideologically engaging in all these varied roles, the tutor is also, indirectly, creating the very practices that make teaching and learning online a rather complex activity (see chapter 3, p. 69).

At Unis@Digital, two things seemed to be true. First, the fact that the online mode of education was new to most students, and therefore they did not know what to expect and had to be taught not only the actual course content but also how to study in this mode when technology was concerned. Second, the fact that this was a new mode of study meant that the courses were designed to meet certain criteria of the provisional legislation in place (e.g. face-to-face exams), while at the same time experimenting with new pedagogies for approaching the online study mode. All this ‘complexity’ created tension from both sides; the students trying to adapt themselves to this study mode, and learning how to study online, while at the same time revisiting their derogatory beliefs about this educational mode, and the institution putting effort into ‘selling the idea’ that studying online was a good thing while at the same time trying to make sure their course authors would design courses in which the students would be encouraged to participate in the online activities, as this was a criterion for success.

¹³ Motivational because the tutor asks the learners to participate in the course and says brings in a personal touch by saying ‘I look forward to seeing you there’.

Some of this tension can be perceived in the email messages 5.16-5.18 (appendix 2, p. 277). These emails are some of the responses from the students to my message above. The inexperience of the students is shown for example in email message 1, when Student B says “I am accessing the course for the first time and I am very confused [...]”, and his confusion was both about how to deal with the technological aspects of the course environment and also about not understanding very well the task itself; or when student C explains that she does not understand what *I* want them to do as part of the task.

For the learners, the tutor always seemed to be the easiest point of contact and the figure who should be supporting them in every aspect of the course: content, technology, assessment, exams dates and so on. In their way of thinking the role of the tutor in e-learning was as comprehensive as the traditional role of a tutor in a face-to-face course, it is the role of a *teacher*. They thought that *I* had written the course and when they read the course tasks they thought that they were reading what *I* wanted them to do. I explained to them that in an online course there are different roles, and that the person who writes the course is not always the tutor. I felt I needed to do so in order for them to understand that I would have to check some of their queries with the course author, because, for example, in the case of the first activity of the course, I was not entirely sure what they had to do either, as something seemed to be missing in the task. I did not think that the task was clear enough, or designed in such a way as to achieve the intended outcomes¹⁴. I did not say this to the students but I did say that my role was to facilitate the course and that it had not been written by me. Whenever there was something not entirely clear I would go and check with the course author and then guide the students through the expected ways to do the tasks.

¹⁴ This task number 1 will be shown and discussed in the section of data type *texts of the tasks*.

These different roles and voices (teacher, course author, pedagogic coordinator) all blended together in the way the course was offered, and this is typical of an online distance course. The students do not usually know, and are not necessarily expected to know, who wrote what and why. But in terms of practice it does seem to make a difference. By knowing who to speak to, for example, for technological problems, the students would be saving the tutor many hours of dealing and sorting emails that do not correspond to their main job, which is to look after the way the course is running in terms of content and student engagement. Little by little the students at Unis@Digital started to understand the dynamics of studying online.

The next email exchange I discuss relates to a specific situation towards the end of the course (appendix 2, 5.11, p. 270), when student A wrote to me criticizing the way the course was offered. These email exchanges were made outside the TelEduc course environment, through my personal Unisa mailbox.

Student A questioned a series of points in terms of Unis@Digital's practice, both pedagogically and institutionally. His email was sent in November, towards the end of the course, and he showed some concern about having to do an exam resit if it was for him to have any chance to pass the course. More interestingly, however, was the series of remarks he made about the online course: that it had too many tasks to do and to take part in, in comparison to the same face-to-face course offered by the institution; that the university had made a false publicity campaign in terms of the time commitment that students in the e-learning mode would have to commit to in order to do the course and finally, that what he was asked to do was 'too much' for an online course.

This is the perspective of a student who seemed to have a deeply rooted derogatory perspective of what a course offered at a distance was like. To him it was unacceptable that an e-learning course would require the learner to do as much as or maybe even more than what a face-to-face course would apparently be requiring from its students.

Student A was part of the cluster of people (very common in Brazil at the time as I mentioned in part I of this chapter) who thought of distance education as poor quality education, or as an easy-to-pass type of education, and his email suggests that he may have chosen to study in this mode in order to make his life easier in relation to his university studies. He was apparently expecting to pass the course with little effort.

Besides the rooted derogatory beliefs about distance education, student A seemed to be evaluating his experience as a distance-education student from the perspective of the face-to-face, traditional classroom-based course. Thus far in his educational experience he had never experimented with e-learning, so comparing it to face-to-face studies seemed to be a logical (and perhaps the only possible) thing for him to do. But most interestingly still is his accusation of a *false publicity campaign* from the part of the university. Unfortunately I was not at Unis@Digital during the recruitment process when they publicized the course. I arrived only one week before the course started and could not follow their campaign. But it was apparent that they had to show the students the benefits of the online study mode, and perhaps by emphasizing the study-flexibility in terms of time, they might have passed the wrong impression to some of the students, the one that flexibility of study time means 'less' study time. In any case, only student A made this formal complaint, so I do not feel it is right to generalize it as consensus in any way.

Student A was not alone in his struggle to follow the course, not necessarily because of the difficulty of the content, but because the innovative and complex ways in which he was expected to *interact* with the content, with the tutor, with other students, with the platform, and with the institution itself. However, most of the other students started to adapt to this new study mode, and instead of neglecting the course and thinking that they could do everything a few days before the exam; they started to notice that studying online was a process, and not an outcome. Unis@Digital had somehow

foreseen this complexity in the institutional document, and assigned the teacher-facilitator as responsible for helping the students deal with this complexity. The role of the teacher-facilitator as described in the institutional document is one of *guidance* and *support provision* for different matters the students may be faced with, from technology-related questions to how to best optimise their learning process in this new mode of education.

At the time of student's A email, I had not yet come across the institutional document. And even if I had, I would perhaps not have reflected on the role of the tutor as proposed. Given Unis@Digital's staff structure, I would have thought that the main person responsible for helping the learners to conciliate all these new roles, responsibilities and experiences as a distance learner was the educational psychologist. I responded to the learner's email (appendix 2, 5.12, p. 271), and from the perspective that he had had so little engagement with the course throughout his list of complaints did not seem to be totally fair. There had been so many opportunities for him to either catch up with the course or think of alternative ways to do so but he did not embrace any. This was the perspective in which I responded to him, and made sure that I pointed it out by telling him how many times he had accessed the course environment by then. The *24 times* the TelEduc's tracking tool reported to me that student A had accessed the course (a very low number in comparison to other students) was used as a legitimate confirmation of his lack of engagement and participation. In this sense, the students' relationship with the technology seems to fall more under an attempt to control rather than a positive relationship of the technology as a mediating artifact in the learning process which role is to support learning to occur in collaborative and creative ways.

The 24 times that student A accessed the course environment were perceived as a low number of accesses, and this seems to have infringed upon a very important aspect of the Unis@Digital model, that of *interaction*. His level of interaction with the various elements

of the course (content, tutor, other students etc) was low and as a result his performance was not satisfactory, because the course (and the assessment plan subsequently) was designed for *high participation*, in terms of engaging with the discussion in the forums. This idea of participation represents a shift of paradigm, however. At the face-to-face courses of Unisa the learners knew that their overall performance was usually assessed by their performance in the exam, and not necessarily by the process taken to learn a given subject. Within the mode designed at the online course, the process became as important as the outcome. Just by answering questions and posting them in the discussion forum the students were assigned marks that helped composing their final mark. This means that not doing these tasks reflected on not accumulating the marks needed to compose the final one.

Whether the course actually had too much to do or whether the problem was a lack of engagement from the student side, neither perspective was taken forward by the course coordinator for further investigation at the time. Unis@Digital was applying an 'end-of-course questionnaire' to the learners and that seemed to be enough. My response to student A was complemented by an email from the pedagogical coordinator (appendix 2, 5.13, p. 272), who also took up an institutional perspective and *defended* the course by saying that Unis@Digital would not compromise with low quality education, and that if the face-to-face course was doing so, the online course would not be brought down to the same level.

Looking at the situation from the outside makes me see a broader social scenario in which this conflict was embedded. The problem did not seem to be only about student A's criticisms immediately related to the course, but also in relation to change the Brazilian educational system was undergoing. There would have to be a shift in the perception of the population for distance education to start to be seen as mode of study at least as good as the traditional face-to-face one. In an attempt for this to happen, both

MEC and the educational institutions themselves started to establish high standards, not to mention that the institutions needed to go through a process of accreditation of their courses, and this process of accreditation (which was happening at the time at Unis@Digital) meant keeping these standards as high as possible. However, alongside this incredible effort to make e-learning appeal to the general population, there was the novelty aspect of e-learning, which was embraced by some and disputed by others, such as student A did. There was the inexperience element too, both on the part of the student and the institution. Unis@Digital, for example, translated this effort of raising the standards of the course as high as possible by over assessing the learners and by being on a constant quest for their participation in the course as a form of evidence of course success. Assessment, participation and the role of the tutor (which is often portrayed as a mix between facilitator and teacher), the three main topics discussed at various levels in the institutional document, seemed to be intertwined themes often appearing in the e-learning practice of Unis@Digital.

In these exchanges of emails between the tutor and the pedagogical coordinator with student A, the voices of the Unis@Digital team seemed to be unified in representing the institution. This institutional representation had an element of authority. The authority was in place to establish order and to shape things as expected by the institutional document of Unis@Digital.

5.8.1 The uses of the technological interface

It was common practice at Unis@Digital to use the noticeboard as a tool to encourage students to visit other areas in the course environment and to perform certain activities:

Message Title	Sender	Timestamp
G7	Eneir Antonio Lardio	27/11/2004 10:23:27
PESCARORES E ANZÓIS	Paulo Regis Simões De Oliveira	27/11/2004 09:21:04
G2	Katia De Freitas Prata Dias Fernandes	26/11/2004 11:38:21
G2- Trabalho em grupo	Melissa De Bastos Gentil	26/11/2004 11:23:38
Pescador de Anzéis	Melissa De Bastos Gentil	26/11/2004 10:47:04
G7 - Trabalho em grupo	Rodolfo Jorge Pettine	25/11/2004 13:56:22
Trabalho G3	Edson Da Silva	25/11/2004 12:42:11
rascunho - Trabalho em grupo	Katia De Freitas Prata Dias Fernandes	25/11/2004 12:16:55
Trabalho em grupo	Rodolfo Jorge Pettine	21/11/2004 18:51:25
Trabalho em Grupo - Grupo Katia, Paulo e Mei	Katia De Freitas Prata Dias Fernandes	21/11/2004 18:43:46
ATENÇÃO - não haverá avaliação no sábado 20/11	Unisadigital	19/11/2004 14:36:09
G3 - Jaime - Cornex	Jaime Feitosa Amorim	18/11/2004 23:25:35
Avaliação - lembrete	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	16/11/2004 18:50:13
G6 - Evandro e Marcial	Nathalia S villas Boas	16/11/2004 13:11:06
Trabalho em grupo	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	13/11/2004 14:14:35
Prorrogação de prazo - importante	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	13/11/2004 14:05:12
Notas	Orlando Bichiqui Junior	12/11/2004 08:56:01
Salas para avaliação ETN 2	Unisadigital	25/10/2004 14:41:28
Fórum do ETN 2	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	21/10/2004 19:36:21
Datas da avaliação do ETN 2	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	21/10/2004 18:50:53
2º chat oficial do ETN 2	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	21/10/2004 18:44:58
1º chat oficial do ETN 2	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	21/10/2004 18:42:41
G5 - SELMA E ROSA	Marcos Aurelio Santana	21/10/2004 15:32:08
Trabalho online em grupo - ETN 2	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	20/10/2004 12:22:00
Sobre a prova do ETN 1 - importante	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	02/10/2004 15:57:48
Questoes para a prova do dia 16/10	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	02/10/2004 15:46:20
Questoes para a prova do dia 05/10	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	02/10/2004 15:42:22
Participem do Fórum de Discussão sobre a ETN 1	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	26/09/2004 18:32:56
2º Chat oficial do ETN 1	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	22/09/2004 18:17:22
1º Chat oficial do ETN 1	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	22/09/2004 18:14:46
Site do curso	Unisadigital	20/09/2004 14:06:47
Encontro Presencial	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	06/09/2004 18:27:35
Prazo final para entrega de atividades - ETN1	Profa. Andreia Inamorato Dos Santos	01/09/2004 17:27:49

Figure 5.3 - Course noticeboard: invitation to chat participation

The message above is only an example of the types of messages posted in the noticeboard. The list of messages in the noticeboard, as shown above, include the following titles:

- Participation in the first chat session of ETN 1
- Participation in the second chat session of ETN 1
- Room number for face-to-face encounter
- Dates for exams
- Exam: reminder
- Group work
- Final marks

As the titles suggest, the content of the messages were of a 'housekeeping' nature, which were sent to the students as a way to guide them through the university calendar for exams, administration matters such as room numbers and places to meet, marks,

students' group division for collaborative work and other forms of participation calls such as for the chat sessions. In summary, the messages were either about institutional matters or about the importance of the students' participation in group activities.

The noticeboard also seemed to serve the purpose of a dynamic course guide, to complement the item 'calendar' of TelEduc, which contained all the course dates. In the Institutional document it was said that the students would receive a study guide (appendix 2, section 3, p. 279) but this did not happen. The students had no printed materials of any kind, and if they were unable to access the course environment for any reason they would have not other channel for information about the course except the telephone.

The noticeboard was a tool controlled only by people with specific levels of priority to edit that part of the virtual learning environment, such as the tutor and the core Unis@Digital team that I introduced in part I of this chapter. In such case the students did not have a 'virtual space' to talk amongst themselves which was not moderated by the teacher-facilitator. In other words, they did not have a place to 'socialise' online with their peer students. Unlikely nowadays, at the time social networking tools were not yet used in Brazil, in which case the TelEduc environment and personal emails were the only possible channels for easy online communication between the students. And this is not because TelEduc did not offer a socializing type of room (it was called the 'Café' area), but because this area was not turned on in the course environment.

The way the noticeboard was used and the purpose for which it was used show some of the mismatches between academic theory and pedagogical practice at Unis@Digital. According to the institutional document, collaborative learning was the academic theory driving the practice at the University, therefore it was expected that the virtual environment in which the course took place offered the learners a room or a space for them to get to know each other, exchange messages and socialize online. This would

work as a means of bonding and creating “study buddies”. Although Unis@Digital encouraged this to happen (see appendix 2, 5.7, p. 268) the course environment did not offer such possibility for unsupervised interaction; and most of the students’ communication was prompted by the course activities and the tutor.

In the language of the tasks for example, the students were encouraged to collaborate with one another. These tasks were mostly written by the course author when designing the course. However, as I mentioned earlier in chapter 4, I re-designed some of the tasks in block 2, which I will discuss here. There is also content in the course environment on ‘how to study’, which although it is not part of the tasks, it is part of the guidance the students receive to complete the tasks, so these are brought to analysis in this section as well. Therefore, I am considering the language of the tasks not only the tasks that appear in the ‘content area’ of the course but also all the email exchanges that related to how the tasks should be carried out.

Although the course encourages collaboration between the learners, the design of the tasks does not always trigger collaboration. For example, block 1 of the course consisted of activities based on the content studied, but these tasks were designed to be done individually. The students were able to perform these tasks just by referring to the course content, and by giving straightforward answers to the questions asked. This is a traditionally didactic way of checking the understanding of the course content, but because the answers to these questions were all based on the content and not on personal opinions or on a collaborative project, these tasks ended up not promoting interaction between the learners.

When clicking in the area circled in the centre of the screen shown in figure 5.3 the students found guidelines on how to study in collaboration with their peer learners (appendix 2, 5.8, p. 269). This text within the home page of the Research Methods course brings in the idea that collaboration should be sustained throughout the course and that

this would aid a better learning process. This is in line with the institutional document, which emphasises that interaction happens at various levels during the course: between individuals, groups, technologies, content and peer-to-peer.

5.9 Block 1 of the course: attempting group discussions through individual tasks

The activities in block 1 of the course are the ones originally designed by the course author. They consist of questions put to the students in relation to the course content studied in this block (appendix 2, 5.15, p. 272 and 5.23, p. 275). Some activities needed to be sent to the tutor via the portfolio tool of the virtual learning environment and one question should be answered in the discussion forum. For answering each one of those questions the students were awarded a mark (anything from 0-1 point depending on how well they answered the questions).

The wording and structure of task 1 (5.23, p. 275) are typical of a step-by-step instructional approach. This sort of activity is largely found in individualizing instruction techniques, where the focus on the verification of the understanding of the course content aims to help the students through their learning path. In the case of Unis@Digital the data shows that 'individualized instruction' techniques are used to foregrounding the learning activities. The learners are doing the activities by themselves but the aim is to check the understanding of the course content.

In order to support some of my reflection on the language of the tasks I need to reintroduce the notion of *voices* into the discussion. The voices found in these texts are of 'universal subjects', e.g. the universal teacher (related to the didactic discourse), the universal facilitator (related to the collaborative learning discourse) and the universal course author (usually related to the institutional discourse). The term 'universal

subject' is used by me to mean someone who is speaking from within a given role in the discourse. It just means that it is not a named subject, but 'a' teacher. What matters is the role the subjects plays, that comes into existence by the voices in the text.

Although in some specific cases I am able to precisely move from the 'universal subject' to the 'named subject', as for example in this task (1), in which it is possible to identify the course voice in the text as being of Maria, the course author, I do not always emphasise such a distinction because it does not make any substantial contribution to my analysis. What a named person does when they draw upon particular voices is to take up a role that is consistent with what is trying to be achieved. For example, the voice of the teacher is a typical voice associated with the didactic discourse (see chapter 2, p. 43), in which the tutor teaches, tells the students what to do and rewards or punishes them according to performance. Certain voices can be more typical of certain discourses than others, but it does not mean that they cannot be found in a wide range of other discourses. It is common that certain voices, typical of certain domains of practice, are drawn upon in other domains in order to enact certain actions, behaviours or outcomes. The voice of the teacher, for example, can be drawn upon by the speaker in a collaborative learning environment. The tutor may speak with the authority of a teacher in a domain in which he/she was expected to act as a guide. This in fact shown in the case study in chapter 6, where the shifts of voices by the tutor is frequent.

In 5.15 the explanation below letter c is the part of the task that I characterize as the course author's voice. In this part I argue that the voice speaking in the text is not that of the teacher, because it says '[...] critical summary must be sent to the teacher-facilitator [...] so that the teacher can understand it'. It is another voice speaking and addressing the tutor in the third-person. This other voice is the course author's voice. However, it is not always clear to the students that this is the case. The whole of the extract 5.15 has

been actually written by the course author, Maria, and particularly the last sentence. However, all the voices mix together in the task instruction.

The learner is not necessarily aware of these various voices in the text. The lack of this perception can influence the tutor-learner relationship in the course. The students responded to task 1 (appendix 2, 5.16-5.18, p. 273) in different ways. I received many emails in my personal mailbox box from students asking for clarification about this task, asking me what I meant by what I had written. On one hand it was very difficult for me to give further explanation of this task as it was not designed by me and I personally felt that the instruction was not very clear. But, on the other hand, I could not change the task. It required the students to find a paper or a text in which they had some interest in, independently of what subject it was about or what genre it belonged to. They had to read it, underline what they considered the most important parts of the text (the ones that contained the main ideas), and elaborate a schema that would serve as basis for the construction of a critical summary. The aim was to check whether the students were able to critically read a text and report on its main ideas.

The first thing that I noticed, as a tutor, was that there was some overlap in the roles of the course author and the tutor in the way the activity had been designed and presented to the students. The language of the task evidenced that there was another voice there rather than the tutor's one. The course author was the one speaking to the students at the moment of the students' reading the task instruction. But when the students addressed me in the personal email, they said things like: 'Andreia, could you please clarify what you want out of this task'? So, for the students, initially it was not clear that the course was different from face-to-face courses in the sense that there was somebody else designing the tasks rather than the course tutor. In this particular email, I should clarify, the student addressed me by my first name rather than 'professora'. Although this is very informal, it is a perfectly acceptable way of addressing a young tutor in a

higher education context in Brazil.

My role as a teacher responsible for marking this task from 0-1 points was very difficult. I could not assess properly if the students really had made their summaries based on the main ideas of the text, as the task did not require the students to send me the original texts they chose to read. It only asks the students to tell me in a few words what the text is about. It also does not ask the students to provide the bibliographic reference of the texts and invariably most students did not do so. In general I felt that the task was not well designed. This experience shows some of the tensions that can happen in e-learning when the author and the course tutor are different people. However, the role of the teacher-facilitator is always to work with the students to overcome all possible misunderstandings that might arise out of a mismatch between task and expected outcome.

But as mentioned in the previous section, although the institution was encouraging communication between the learners and was even asking them to create a 'support group', the way the course dynamics were developing through the virtual platform was not allowing this to happen, as it was neither enabling informal contact between the learners nor requiring them to do the tasks together. In addition, the actual design of the course tasks did not prompt student engagement either.

Course tasks 2 and 3 (appendix 2, 5.15, p. 272 and 5.23, p. 275) are to be done individually by the learners, and then shared with the course tutor and other tutors at Unis@Digital who wish to see the individual portfolios, such as the pedagogic coordinator or the educational psychologist, for example. The individual tasks are based upon a traditional way of task design aiming to check what the students have learned from the course materials. Tasks 2 and 3 ask the students to reproduce the course materials exactly, by prompting the students to revisit the content they studied (e.g. specific authors, concepts etc).

There had been no collaborative learning element in the tasks so far. Tasks 1-3 are individual tasks, to be completed by the students and sent to the tutor. In task 5.14 there was an attempt to make collaborative learning fit in block 1, by asking the students to join the discussion forum (appendix 2, 5.22, p. 275). This task requires the students to talk about the importance of a certain concept and reflect about what it means to the students' own learning process. It is still an individual task, however, and due to its design it did not prompt an engaging discussion between the students. The problem is that task 5.22 does not require the students to construct a shared understanding or to defend their positions about a certain theme, as collaborative learning tasks are supposed to do (see chapter 2, p. 25).

Although task 5.22 aims to prompt collaborative learning, the design of the task lacks the appropriate structure and wording to prompt collaboration and engagement in the discussion by the students. It is a collaborative learning activity designed in the domain of a didactic, individualized approach to pedagogy. Therefore, the task did not lead to the actions expected from the learners. In the discussion forum, the students answered the question in task 5.22, but did not address their colleagues' responses at any time.

One of the things these tasks show is that actual task design impacts on how collaborative learning is or is not performed in the course. The idea behind the Unis@Digital course design is that if everyone posts an answer to the discussion forum, there will be enough posts to engage the students in a meaningful discussion of the course content, which will lead to learning; but unfortunately, task 4, as I suggested previously, does not promote the engagement between participants, because it is still an individual task.

Another aspect perceived in the tasks is the intertextuality within which the task design operates. Various voices are drawn upon in an attempt to create desired outcomes.

These voices are typical of particular discourses, which are instantiated through the

language choices in the tasks. It is worth clarifying that these language choices and voices in the texts are not necessarily conscious choices made by the text author, but part of an ideological system which is embedded in the thinking of educational practitioners. As discussed in chapter 3, Fairclough (2000), based on the work of Pêcheux, claims that ideology has a material existence in the practices of the institutions. Therefore, investigating these discursive practices is a way to investigate these material forms of ideology.

These ideologies are embedded in the discursive practices, and they become commonsense, that is, they are naturalised in language in use to the extent that they are not easily perceived. The ways in which different voices are drawn upon in the texts are unconscious textual constructions performed by the course authors and tutors. It all depends on their perceptions of teaching and learning practices (beliefs and personal experiences) and their ideological systems (which are historically defined). These will lead them to favour certain choices over others.

In block 1 I had been tutoring the course without making any changes to it. I had noticed, however, that the students were sometimes struggling with their participation in the discussion forum because the tasks required were mostly based on individual activities, which did not engage the learners in doing things together. Most of the tasks had straightforward answers so it was difficult for them to find something to talk about in the discussion forum. The students simply posted their answers in the discussion forum in order to get the marks, but did not really get involved in genuine discussions. Also it was not clear in their minds that the course was written by someone else other than the tutor. The tasks were not always clear and they turned to me for clarification as if I was the author of the tasks. This being case, I decided to take a more proactive position in the second half of the course. That was my reflexive turn: I decided I would try to prompt more collaborative learning by engaging the students in a series of

activities involving more discussion. I believe that to a certain extent I was also the type of tutor that would perceive collaborative learning to be the most appropriate way to tutoring online, just like the tutors that my literature review portrayed.

5.10 Block 2: Reflective teaching and collaborative learning in the tasks

Block 2 of the course was set to be a collaborative learning activity. This is how the course had originally been designed by the course author at Unis@Digital. Although I made small changes in the way the task was presented, I kept the activities as 'group work' in the same way it was proposed by the course author originally. My actual aim was to create a collaborative activity that would enable the students to do the work in groups, but entirely online.

As I mentioned in part I of this chapter, the students came from different face-to-face courses: business administration, economics and foreign trade. I thought that if I set up the groups myself, mixing the participants from different courses, it would make sense for them to do the work in the virtual environment, because they did not study in the same classroom and would not necessarily know each other. I also assumed they would not see each other very often. However, they were all based on campus and would eventually meet up with each other anyway, outside the classroom, in the communal areas of the university. Trying to make the group task entirely online, therefore, did not work as I expected, because I was forcing the students to work online when they actually could do part of the work face-to-face. It seemed reasonable that once they would see each other on a regular basis they would talk about the group assignment.

On reflection, however, I used a very didactic and traditional approach to setting up the collaborative learning activity, in order to try and reproduce one of the institutions goals: online course participation. At the time I also shared the opinion with the

institution that if one can see student collaboration happening online then they are studying the course in the expected ways (by sharing knowledge). By setting up the groups myself, I was using my authority of a teacher to try and guide how the course should run.

I advised the students where to go to look for their group members and they did not have any opportunity to choose who they were going to work with. I mentioned in this chapter that I had reasons to do so but reflecting on the approach I used, it goes against the principles of collaborative learning, where the tutor is only a facilitator and should not carry more power than the learners, at least in principle.

The group portfolio was a working space for the students to interact, and part of their mark would be given for the participation each of the students had in the elaboration of the assessment as a group. The teacher-facilitator had access to all group portfolios, and could therefore see the interaction that was expected to happen between the students for this task. The students faced some problems in trying to get together to do the task online: some groups of students had group members that were not interested in doing the activity or would not access the course environment frequently enough.

Some of the students started to develop a strategy on how to communicate with each other, which was not what was expected by the Unis@Digital team and myself. I mentioned in chapter 4 that the students registered for the online course were also face-to-face students of other disciplines in various courses at the university. Students started to try to find out who were the learners that were taking the online course on Research Methods, and started to network face-to-face, in the intervals between their face-to-face classes or during longer coffee breaks.

Although it did not seem to be a major problem that the students were contacting each other face-to-face, they were not using the virtual environment as much as they could have done, except for reading the content, posting tasks and taking part in discussions

and chats when required. This is perhaps one of the reasons why when they were asked to perform a collaborative task online they struggled to do so, they were not used to exchanging messages, discussing content and working on tasks online. The students were still developing the skills to study collaboratively online, and at that time they only knew how to collaborate face-to-face, and as they were seeing each other face-to-face anyway they did not seem to find a strong reason to collaborate online. It was very difficult therefore to implement a real collaborative task online, because the work would most probably be done face-to-face.

One could argue that as long as the students are collaborating and learning it is perfectly fine for them to do so face-to-face. However, as I mentioned previously, one of the elements for success of an online course at Unis@Digital was to see interaction (or participation) happening 'in the course environment'. If the students were speaking to each other outside the environment there would be no trace of collaboration in the course environment that could be tracked.

In this second block of the course I also experimented with the design of the activities. I was not allowed to change the content of the course, but I was allowed to set up the questions as I wished. I was not allowed to change the marks assigned to the questions either. So I decided I would change part of the first question, which originally included four sections (I changed the first two sections). I re-wrote activity one and offered it as second option. So, for activity one, the students could choose between two options. Option one was the original task design as the course author wrote and option two was the option with my modifications.

I did not change all the questions because I did not want to be too intrusive in the current course design, but I wanted to experiment and try to create learning experiences that included activities requiring more engagement with the task on the part of the learner. I had noticed that the way the questions in the tasks had been designed was

very didactic, dominated by a transmission model of education. They were straight forward questions that in turn required the students to give straight forward answers. They were not bringing the application of the content to the real world, or using real situations as examples for knowledge application and consolidation of the learning. For these reasons, I decided to modify one of the tasks as designed by Unis@Digital and offer it as a second option. The learners would be able to choose which task to do. The two versions of the tasks (before and after my changes) can be found in the appendix 1, 5.11, p. 270 and 5.12, p. 271.

Most of extract 5.19 presents the course author's voice. Through her voice it is possible to identify a traditional pedagogy underpinning the task design. The students are asked to do the tasks by themselves and to post them in their individual portfolios to be marked by the teacher with up to one point allocated. Once more the questions were knowledge telling, requiring from the learner simple answers taken directly from the course content (e.g. What is a research project?). In 5.20 I present how I changed the task in an attempt to create an activity that would engage the learners in explaining the rationale for their answers. Most students opted for option 2 (my design) and I was pleased to see their engagement with the content overall. They said to me that they enjoyed having a task in which they could be creative and apply what they had studied to solve a situation (even though it was fictitious).

At this point it was time for a second chat session to take place, aiming to discuss the content of block 2. After the chat we planned to continue the discussion asynchronously, by means of the discussion forum. In appendix 5.21 (p. 274) is the question which I asked the students in the discussion forum. It asks the students to elicit the differences between the two types of research, with the aim of testing their understanding of the content. This practice recalls a didactic way of teaching. I was speaking with the voice of a teacher giving the students some tasks, the answers to which could be found in the

course materials. The aim of the question was to prompt the continuation of the discussion that took place in the chat, in which the students and I discussed these research methods and their implications. In this sense, although the question was written in a didactic way, its aim was a collaborative one. I expected the discussion to continue between the students and I, as a way of sharing their understanding and seeking advice in case they realised they did not understand those concepts well.

The second discussion forum question (appendix 5.22, p. 275) also followed up the same chat session. However, it focused on an issue raised during the chat rather than on one from the course materials, but still related to the content. I realise that in 5.22 I first give an explanation about the question (my view on the concept of truth) and then I asked the students to tell me their understanding. It was likely that in their replies the students would be influenced by my explanation, rather than telling me their actual understanding, but this did not happen. I did not do it on purpose, though – I was not expecting the students to repeat what I said. I just took advantage of the forum to insert some additional explanation around a subject that I considered important for the students to think about. In response to what we were discussing in the chat, some students said that what is proven by science is an unquestionable truth. Others said the truth could only be found in the object observed, not by the observer. Only one student had a concept of truth in science that was similar to my own, which was that the truth could be constantly challenged by science as new theories come up and disprove previous ones.

My didactic way of teaching in this extract can be perceived in the introductory piece of teaching that I did before asking the question: ‘The concept of truth is always questionable (...)’ This didactic approach has this embedded idea of *acquisition of knowledge*. Learning is different from student to student; overall it is achieved when there is a critical reflection on the content. Some activities do not prompt reflection on

what is being said and therefore there is a chance that this will be seen by the student as information but not necessarily content to be learned. This is what happened in the discussion forum question I created, which similarly to the question in block 1 (task 3) (appendix 5.23, p. 275), did not prompt much participation in the forum. The question was very mechanical in the sense that it was enough for the students to consult the course content to find out the expected answer. No discussion amongst the students was required in the task, and in fact a contradiction appears in the way the task was designed. The contradiction is that it was a question posted in the discussion forum but that aimed to gather the students' responses in their individual portfolios. Therefore it was an individual task misplaced in the discussion forum area. This caused a sense of confusion in both students and me as a tutor, because neither of us would see a discussion taking place in the forum area due to the limitations of what the task proposed. It caused some sort of anxiety, because some students posted their messages in the forum as well, but there was absolutely no connection between the messages in the thread because all of them were self-contained answers (as expected), therefore not offering enough stimulus for engagement in a discussion. In block 1, as explained previously, I did not change the tasks and this question was given to me to be posted in the forum area, as per the original design of the course.

The courses at Unis@Digital overall seemed to have a static design, which the tutors could not change easily. Lucia, a tutor at the Research Methods course at Unis@Digital in the annual course (I taught at the semi-annual course, which was more condensed than the full year version), told me in an interview about her experience as a tutor at Unis@Digital. Lucia felt she could not change the course activities to cater for the specific needs of her students in the online course. In this sense there seemed to be an institutional layer mediating the interaction between student-tutor (appendix 5.24, p. 275).

Similarly to what happens in course design, the marks were also responsible for the *institutionalization* of the course. All the activities were assigned a mark, which could vary between 0-0.5 and 1 point. This practice of assigning a mark for every single activity in the course was at many times overwhelming both for the students and for the teacher-facilitator – for the students because they felt obliged to say something even when they had nothing to say, and for the tutor because he/she needed to keep track of how many questions each of the thirty-six students answered, and how well they did so. In an interview with Sara, the educational psychologist of Unis@Digital, she said to me that the approach to the assessment in the institution was a ‘progressive, processual and diagnostic one’. This is because they felt that the students should be assessed gradually, instead of receiving a mark only towards the end of their courses as a result of a final exam (appendix 5.24, p. 275). Sara makes it clear that all the students are expected to participate in the course. Participation in this context means something other than simply doing the course assignments and guaranteeing a good mark (passing the course). Participation in e-learning seems to be about engaging with the tasks in the online environment, with the peer students, and with the facilitator. It also seems to mean taking part in every single activity in the course, certifying that the student is doing the required work. Simply getting a good enough mark to pass in the final assignment does not seem to be a satisfactory measure of the students’ performance in a course within this e-learning framework.

Participation in every activity seems to be very important. In 5.24 (p. 275) Sara explained to me that traditionally the Brazilian students are very passive, being used to the teacher taking control and telling them what to do. Unis@Digital was slowly trying to change this by making the student understand that they can be more proactive in their learning process. For that to happen, the strategy was to make the tutor offer step-by-step support on how to study online and to bring the student into a more

participatory role. The pedagogic coordinator, Maria, confirms this in her interview (5.25 p. 275). She talks about her conception of the role of the teacher-facilitator, which is in line with a view of a facilitator, a motivator. The role of the teacher-facilitator at Unis@Digital is that of a motivator in the sense of “stirring up the student’s participation” (Maria, 5.25, p. 275).

The word *participation* seems to assume a new meaning in e-learning. As discussed in chapter 2, Sfard (1998:6) argues that current views of learning suggest that the learner is someone interested in taking part in learning activities rather than simply accumulating knowledge. She argues that ‘learning a subject is now conceived as a process of becoming a member of a certain community’. At Unis@Digital the students were directed to the discussion forums and chats in an attempt to create such a community of learning. However, it was not always straightforward because a community can only be created when there are shared interests and when its members have something to contribute. In the case of Unis@Digital, although the students certainly had the potential to contribute, what was mostly driving their participation at this point were the marks associated with the tasks and not necessarily a genuine desire to engage in the online activities, as for many of them studying online was something completely new and still in need of exploration.

Although I am not focusing on a comparison of online distance education with face-to-face education in this thesis, there is still a useful distinction to be made between a face-to-face course, which traditionally assumed that reading the course material is embedded in the concept of taking a course, and an online environment in which course materials are treated as a separate thing. In this e-learning perspective there is an assumption that one can take the course (participate in a course) without reading the course materials, or by simply skimming through it without any in-depth engagement with the content. By assigning a mark to every single activity, the teacher (and to a

certain extent the institution) tries to guarantee that the learner studies the course materials. In a face-to-face environment this is not necessary because the lectures are designed to cover the course content, and the final assessment is the all-important measure of whether the students have learned and whether they deserve to pass the course. In e-learning, participation in all learning tasks seems to be as important as having a good final mark. In the next chapter I present the Syracuse university case study, in which there is a similar perception regarding the importance of participation in the learning tasks.

6 *Case study 2: Syracuse University*

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present and analyse the data from the Syracuse university case study. As I explained in chapter 4, this case study took place entirely online except for the face-to-face interview with the tutor, whose name here has been changed to Robert for the purpose of anonymity. In chapter 4 I have also given an introduction to the types of learners on the Syracuse course, and to the course itself, so in this chapter I provide a brief overview of the course content and approach, and move on to the data analysis.

Although mostly I take a chronological approach to the data analysis in this chapter, as in chapter 5, I do bring in some of the discussion of the interview with the tutor early in the chapter. The reason is that at Syracuse I did not have access to any institutional documents regarding their teaching approach. The information I have comes from personal communications with the tutor and also from the interview he gave me. This information consists of insider accounts regarding the approach, and helps me to describe the context in which the practices took place. This is part I of the chapter. In part II, I focus on data from emails, texts of the tasks and other types of data, including the interview.

Part I: Syracuse: the institutional context

6.2 How the course was set up

Robert, the course tutor, mentions that the course is based on principles of self-directed learning. It is also assessment-driven, and in the interview extract 6.1 (appendix, p. 315) he explains how the students could choose their final course mark even before starting studying the course.

In this extract Robert brings to the fore the intrinsic nature of formal education through universities, the role of the accreditation of knowledge. He touches on an important point which is how this institutional practice of knowledge recognition permeates the teaching and assessment approaches of his course, and indeed the experiences of the learner as a whole. Here, the institutional discourse is being instantiated in the practices, through the idea of knowledge recognition. By choosing their final mark right from the beginning of the course the students were choosing how much effort they would put into the course and therefore how much learning they were prepared for.

The institutional context of Syracuse is further explored by Robert, who tells me what underpinned the approach and the practices around e-learning in this particular course. He explains that he does not live in Syracuse all the time, but sometimes works from other countries. Teaching online suits his lifestyle and he has been doing it for over eight years. It also suits the students' lifestyle, he suggests. The reason is that some students, like him, prefer to have this flexibility of studying from different places, or they attend the course online because it is the online study mode offered for that particular course, and if they really want to do it they have no other option but to study online.

The course itself has a long history, Robert explains. It has started ten years previously (at the moment of the interview) when Syracuse University had a very vibrant School of

Education. It was closed down by the dean due to political and financial reasons, rather than because it was not effective. At the time Syracuse was already using online learning as one of the course delivery methods. The author of the course (Clive Williams)¹⁵ retired from the university during period. The author still teaches part-time in another university (at the time of the interview), but the course he wrote was 'inherited' by Robert, as he explains (appendix 6.2, p. 315).

In extract 6.2 Robert explains that he was not the course author. He did make a few modifications in the course by including some new materials, but tried to teach the course more or less as originally designed by the author. In doing so, and in trying to keep up with a more self-directed approach, Robert perceives his tutor role as one of a facilitator (appendix 6.3, p. 315).

The situation in Syracuse differs from Unis@Digital in that the students have more experience of e-learning, it not being a new mode of education in the institution. As mentioned above, the students were able to be more self-directed. Robert's level of confidence in his delivering of the course allowed for some experimentation, and one of the innovative things he did was to invite the original course author to be a special guest in the course. This means that the author was participating in the course by posting messages and interacting with the students on a regular basis, which Robert felt worked well.

Compared to the Unis@Digital case study, it is interesting to see that a certain level of experience with e-learning allows for both students and tutor to have a more open and negotiable relationship. At Unis@Digital, for example, the students did not have the perception that the course author and the tutor could be different individuals. At Syracuse this was so clear that the students displayed no resistance to interacting either with the author or the tutor. The course author, however, knew that in participating in

¹⁵ Clive Williams is a fictitious name

the course he should not interfere with the tutor's role, and in this sense he performed well. He was not given specific instructions, but his experience enabled him to assume the role of guest in an unproblematic way. The course author simply posted a few messages giving some points of view or describing his past experience, and the students seemed to be very appreciative of his input.

My interview and other personal communication with Robert enabled me to discuss his perceptions of the students' behaviour and the teaching approach used in his course. Robert is a very experienced tutor, and told me about how education could be aimed at students' professional needs, for example in the case of open polytechnics in the 1970s and 1980s in England. In that model he explained that learners and faculties would collaborate in putting together a curriculum that would meet the needs of the students as workers, which is why the students could choose what they were going to be assessed on, and how. This is a model of teaching based on Andragogic principles, and where possible it had been kept in some of the Syracuse courses, such as the course Robert was teaching. He says that this concept of lifelong learning and continued education tended to be kept mostly outside the formal university, because of the need to constantly adapt and change the curriculum to meet new job requirements.

When applied in a formal university environment, he argues that this concept of *negotiation of curriculum* changes. This is because at a formal university level, even when the input is open and flexible (such as when the students do not need to have previous qualifications to take a course, e.g. OU UK), the output is fixed, which is to say that everyone has to take the same exams and the same material is applied to everyone. At Syracuse there was an attempt to keep some of the principles of negotiation: the students needed a certain amount of credits to pass and get a degree, but how they construct their program is very flexible. But even in this flexible model, he argues, negotiation only works up to a certain point, because at some point institutional barriers

interfere with what can be done and how. "There are a lot of things that do not seem to work in practice", he explains. Robert mentions that some students get upset when they are not directed, and gave the example of some Brazilian and American students (some of the latter on his current Syracuse course), as he had had the opportunity to teach online in both countries. For Robert, the educational tradition in which the student was brought up in can actually play a role when the students start to study online, as students tend to want a similar educational experience to the one they are used to. In his Syracuse course, for example, "...there's a limit 50-50 or whatever that you can say that is involving students in the planning of their own courses. Half of it is artificiality" (appendix 6.4, p. 315), he says. The reason he gives is that the students can set up some course goals and do the seminars by researching topics that they are interested in, but they would still need to comply with some institutional rules such as getting marks and participate in the online activities, besides having a specific course material, and these could not be changed. Robert mentions that the writing of learning contracts is artificial because of the constraints imposed by the institutional context (appendix 6.5, p. 316).

This set of rules is part of the institutional discourse, I would argue. It is the institutional discourse that frames what can and cannot be done in the course. The conversation with Robert was very interesting, because I not only found out about his background as an online tutor, but I also gained a better understanding of the motivations behind offering a course online with so much freedom for the learner to decide what and how to study, and what grade they want to work towards. The role of the tutor here seemed to be to intermediate the relationship between the learners and the institution in order for the former to achieve a formal recognition of knowledge.

Most of the course was based on online seminars that the students had to organise together, from the content, based on a previous agreement at the beginning of the course (their learning contract), to how they would present it to other learners: e.g.

power point slides or other audiovisual format. This was only possible because the students were more mature both academically speaking and in terms of dealing with virtual learning environments and studying online. There were six seminars overall, the first led by Robert and the other five by the students. The learners decided who would be their group members and also voted on the topic they wished to discuss.

6.3 The concept of course participation at Syracuse

At Syracuse the concept of students' participation was as important as it was for Unis@Digital. If the students were not posting in the discussion forums, the course at Syracuse would be perceived a 'total failure' (appendix 6.6, p. 316). Robert's comment shows his own perception of the importance of getting the students to participate online, which for him can be greatly affected by the small numbers in the group, while at the same time showing the perception of the students, who feel that they 'need to say something' in order for the course to run well. It seems that it was not enough to give the freedom to decide what to study and how, or even to decide on the final mark they are aiming for. Course success is measured by the amount of participation the students have – a perception similar to that at Unis@Digital.

In summary, the main points about the institutional context at Syracuse in comparison to Unis@Digital are the following:

a) Contextual similarities to Unis@Digital:

- In both courses the students were campus-based, with the option to take one discipline online;
- In both courses there was a perception that the more the students participated online, the more successful the course was;
- In both courses the role of the tutor was seen as that of a 'facilitator', although at Unis@Digital the *teacher's* role was also acknowledged .

Both courses aimed at collaborative learning as the approach behind the practices. At Syracuse, although they were focusing on studying Andragogy, the tutor mentions that the approach they were taking was not only based on Knowles, but on others as well. It was only in personal communications with me that the tutor mentioned collaborative learning, not in his interview. However, the collaborative learning principles can be evidenced in the data, as most of the tasks were dependent upon the learners to do things together through collaboration (e.g. decide on topics to study, do online seminars together and take part in discussion forums). The role of the tutor as a 'facilitator' is another point of connection between the two cases, also typical of the collaborative learning approach.

b) Contextual differences from Unis@Digital:

- At Syracuse, both the institution and the learners were experienced in e-learning;
- At Syracuse the course was at a postgraduate level;
- The number of students in the course was smaller at Syracuse;
- The students were embedded in different socio-cultural contexts (Brazil - USA)

The principle of self-directness was important at Syracuse, whereas at Unis@Digital the effort was towards making the learners give the first steps in studying at a distance.

Part II: The Syracuse Course

6.4 Analysis of the course data

In this part of the chapter I bring in data from the course itself. My aim is to look at the role of the tutor, and to examine whether, as Robert intended, it is one of a *facilitator*. I also look at how the concept of *participation* is played out, and how *assessment* practices are performed. The three themes of 'role of the tutor', 'participation' and 'assessment' are very much to the fore in part I of this chapter, where I present the context in which the course took place. These are also the themes I worked with in the analysis of the Unis@Digital data, as they also emerged strongly from their context, particularly through their institutional discourse.

As I mentioned in chapter 4, my approach to the data is both thematic and chronological. Here I analyse the data according to the sequence in which the course took place, using their own terminology: *pre-module and modules 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5*. Pre-module aims to introduce the course to the learners and to make them aware of the approach the course will be based upon and what it consists of (such as a learning contract); module two is designed to help students to set up their own contract; module three consists of a mid-term progress assessment report; module four consists of an organizational audit activity and module five were the individual projects, negotiated by the students and tutor. Running alongside modules three, four and five there are online seminars. These seminars are intended to cover the content of a set book. A number of chapters are assigned to a group of students who are responsible for reading them and presenting them to their fellow students (usually as a power point presentation), as well as any other extra reading associated to their topic. The seminar group is required to post some questions in the discussion forum related to the subject of their seminar. The

students must interact with all the seminar groups. The topics of the seminars were related to SDL (self-directed adult learning), II (Individualised instruction) and LL (Lifelong Learning).

6.4.1 Pre-module: the roles of the tutor and the concept of 'participation'

According to Gee (1999/2006), language enacts specific social activities and identities. In other words, we use spoken or written language to create the activities around us. For example, tutors use language to ask students to perform some tasks, and the students use written or spoken language to respond to those requests and to do those tasks. Language-in-action can therefore 'create' the world around us. However, these activities are built not only through the language as it is 'said or written', but they depend also on other extra-linguistic factors, in order to be meaningful. For example, sometimes a visual exchange, some gestures, the tone of our voices while we speak will shape the meaning of the language we use to perform certain activities. At the same time, in written contexts, our grammatical choices, the vocabulary we use, the modalities and other language-related choices will also shape the activities. The wider context in which language is used, for example the specific institutional context, will also play a significant role in the language choices we make to create certain activities.

Below I highlight the ways in which the tutor shifts from a position of facilitator to one of teacher, and vice-versa. By invoking different voices the tutor supports his own purposes (Maybin, 2001). The voices drawn upon are supporting the tutor in his different roles: when the tutor is trying to set up a collaborative learning activity he positions himself as a facilitator; when he is trying to set up an individual study activity he positions himself as a teacher. The roles indicate the discourses associated with the tutor's approach to teaching and learning online (didactic, institutional or collaborative),

and the ways in which the tutor communicates with the students (his language choices) are also associated with these discourses.

In the pre-module the tutor speaks as a facilitator, drawing on the collaborative learning discourse to set up this learning activity. The name of the learning activity (or task) is 'course participation'. It implies that the performance of the students, that is, their final mark, will be attributed in relation to, but not purely on the basis of, a number of activities or tasks described in this particular learning activity. As I discussed previously, participation is one of the key words in the collaborative approach to teaching and learning online. Course participation in Syracuse is expected by means of using the different communication technologies such as chats, discussion forums and e-mails, because the participation in all these activities involves other students and allow for peer collaboration. It is what is in the bulk of the collaborative learning approach applied to teaching and learning online.

The task in the pre-module starts with an introduction by the tutor, the aim of which is to discuss what is meant by 'course participation'. In order to do so the tutor explains to the learners that this activity will involve online tasks, and also that even the activities that are not performed online count as course participation. In this case, reading a book off-line is part of this learning activity and therefore, part of the assessment strategy (appendix 6.7, p. 316).

In this extract course participation is presented as a learning activity, and subject to assessment. However, by taking a course it is implicit that one's participation is required, but this extract reveals that this type of course participation seems to mean more than simply taking the course. It is a way of engaging the students in all the learning activities proposed in the course because those will all be part of the students' assessment. Consequently, it is a way of forcing the students to take part in the discussion forum and post their messages, as well as commenting on the posts of the

other learners, as will be requested further. It is a way to make the students to have an online presence, and consequently a tentative way to make a collaborative approach to work for this course. The evidence of course participation and collaboration in the discussion forums, for example, is a way to measure the success of the teaching approach and consequently, of the course.

In reflecting on course participation as a learning activity one can find the premises of the collaborative learning for online teaching, in which taking part in a discussion forum and learning collaboratively with others online is central to the approach. I would therefore argue that this new 'framing' for course participation, meaning something different from conventional participation, can be located within the collaborative learning discourse. In appendix 6.8 (p. 316) is the paragraph that concludes the activity. In this extract the tutor takes up the voice of a facilitator and tries to motivate the students to contribute to the three discussion threads. However, it has already been said that participation in this activity is compulsory, so the final marks of students who do not take part in the discussion will be affected.

The collaborative approach appears once again in the text, as the postings of the students are not addressed by the tutor as answers to the questions but as contributions to the discussion. The tutor is speaking as a facilitator (appendix 6.9, p. 316). In this role he is guiding the students on how to interact in the online course environment and is stressing how important it is for the students to communicate online. He describes it as 'an essential part of the course activities'.

As I argued in previous chapters, in online courses there is usually a course-author behind the scene, who might not be the course tutor, and who sometimes becomes completely invisible to the students. This can create the illusion for the learners that the tutor has full control of what is being taught, and of the tasks they have been asked to do. One of the implications is that, at the same time that a tutor might mistakenly be

praised for the good job in choosing certain readings and in creating the course syllabus, they might also be blamed for doing it in a way that does not correspond to the students' expectations. This particular type of implication has also been presented in the *Unis@Digital* case-study in the previous chapter. It can also mean that the online course syllabus is not as flexible as it could be if the course had been created with specific audiences and their needs in mind, allowing for more negotiation. However, flexibility comes at a cost and it is not always convenient for the institutions to pay such costs.

In this course at Syracuse the tutor made it explicit to the students that the course had been created by Clive Williams, and he invited Clive to be a guest speaker in the course. However, this distinction does not always appear explicitly in the voice of the tutor, as in the case of activity 1 in the pre- module, The voice of Clive as the one 'requesting' that the students read the set book was present, but was blended with the voice of the tutor.

In the interview the tutor states that he did not want to allocate the time to rewriting the course because he was reasonably satisfied with the way it was, as it had been successful with the students in previous years. Perhaps he had the academic freedom to change the course if he wanted to, but he did not do so because he said he had no direct interest in it. However, this was not made explicit to the students. On the contrary, the reasons made explicit to the students are rather different than those he gave in the interview, as illustrated by the extract 6.10 (p. 317).

This explanation draws on biological reasons to support his justification for not updating the course material. It is not the same institutional discourse present in the interview that appears to the learner, or a justification based on his personal career interests. In this instance it seemed that making it clear to the students the real reasons for the tutor not to update the course materials was not appropriate. Rather, the tutor had to look for other reasons that might also be true, but are not necessarily the main

ones which drove his decision. He found these reasons outside the institutional discourse.

In online courses the learner does not always know 'who is speaking' in the text. It is often not evident to the learner that someone else could have written the course, and that what is being requested to them as a learning task has not always been devised by the tutor themselves. The course-author's voice implicit in the course design is an institutional construction, reflecting the institutional context to which the tutor has to adapt himself and the social role he plays as a tutor. The degree to which this institutional discourse is apparent will depend on how the course is designed. Writing a course costs the institution money, as does re-writing. The tutor would have to devote spare time to re-writing, checking bibliography and proof-reading, among other tasks, and all of these activities would have to be paid for, with resources allocated every time a course is offered. It is certainly more cost-effective, from an institutional point of view, to re-use a course until it needs revision – and by no means am I criticising this practice. In this case the tutor also has his personal career issues, with choices what to focus on and devote time to. What I aim to illustrate is how the discursive practices of the online classroom draws upon different institutional contexts through different voices, which have specific agendas.

6.4.2 Pre-module: the roles of the tutor and assessment

In extract 6.11 (p. 317) the voice of the tutor acting as a teacher comes into play. The tutor explains things, such as how the set book is out of print but not out-of-date. This is the position of a teacher, the one who has things to *explain*. He also refers to a book he edited as a means to emphasise his authority in the field, so that he could claim that the book in question is not out of date. This 'authority' to talk on a subject is a form of

'power', in this case a form of social power from which the teacher then assumes a privileged position in relation to the students because he knows more. The voice of the teacher in this extract can be associated with a more didactic way of teaching.

For example, in extract 6.11 (p. 317, continued from the previous) the tutor refers to his book, so his authority in the field is once more emphasised. The voice (of the teacher) used in the extract above clearly distances the tutor from the course author. The course authors are mentioned in the language of the tasks, and the role of the tutor as a teacher is more evident, as he not only continues to demonstrate his authority in the field (by mentioning the book he edited) but also brings in the assessment element to the module in a very didactic way. The didactic approach can be perceived in 'the time has come to review what you have found in your introductory reading assignments'. This is a traditional assessment practice in teaching and learning, where the aim is to verify how much has been learned out of the content that has been presented.

The didactic approach is quite deeply embedded in the text. By analysing the lexical and semantic aspects of the text one can note that the tasks given to the students are written using modalities, as imperative and declarative sentences (appendix 6.12, p. 317). The declarative and imperative sentences are presented in this extract as the examples below, from the extract:

You should by now have got into reading ... (declarative)

Read the opening summary presentation ... (imperative)

The use of modalities in texts is important for texturing the roles of the speaker, which in this case is the one of a teacher. The choice for certain modal verbs and avoidance of others gives a message about these roles. The power-relation between the teacher and the students is evidenced given the requisite nature of the text. This can be a typical

didactic approach of teaching and learning, in which the tasks and activities are presented to the students in this modalised form, as commands or requirements that are essential so that learning can occur.

In relation to the imperative clause, according to Fairclough (2003), it is a prescription. Embedded in the prescription is a value-assumption. For example, in a value-assumption there is this dichotomy good and bad or desirable and undesirable. In the prescription 'Read the opening summary...' there is this assumption that this is a desirable and good thing to do, therefore it is a value-assumption. Implicit in this way of approaching the learning task is the understanding that if the students did not read the opening summary it would be a bad, undesirable thing.

Fairclough (2003) also argues that what is said is said against what is unsaid. A value-assumption works exactly on the level of what is unsaid, by drawing on common sense. Value-assumptions help to shape the ways in which power is distributed in society. Assumptions of any kind are related to discourses, because they draw on particular ways of talking about things or particular ways of doing things. These particular ways of doing or talking about things are socially accepted and taken as common sense, and therefore they are embedded in the discourses. For example, in the didactic approach of teaching and Learning, it is common to see the learning activities presented as declarative or imperative sentences, as it is to find modalities and assumptions in these texts. This is typical of a didactic approach in teaching and learning and therefore it is almost always a taken-for-granted, unquestionable practice.

As I mention previously, it is through the context that one can attempt to locate the discourse being pulled in as 'didactic' or 'collaborative'. In extract 6.12 the tutor asks the students to read the course-author's chapters that have recently been published in a book edited by him. This was probably not something originally presented in the course but an adaptation that the tutor did to the course he is now teaching. The roles and the

voices in the text keep shifting as different discourses come into play. In this extract the didactic discourse is present in the sense that the tutor is explaining to the students what to do step by step, in a very didactic way of teaching. At the same time, however, the aim of the task is to enable the students to participate in an online discussion, which is to say, the task is actually trying to trigger collaborative learning. An example of how the voice of the tutor may be based on a didactic discourse but to have a collaborative learning intention is for example when Robert says: "Prepare yourself to participate on a discussion of 'what is the latest' in relation to both academic theory and the pedagogical practice of adult learning" (6.12, p. 317). He uses a didactic way of teaching (i.e. by systematically telling the students what to do) but with the aim to make them take part in a discussion in the course forum. The language choices in 6.12 portray the tutor as a teacher, but aiming for a collaborative learning task.

6.4.3 The shifting voices of the tutor

In 6.12 the collaborative learning approach can be identified in the learning activity through the expectation that the students would communicate by using the technologies such as e-mails and the discussion area of the virtual learning environment of this Syracuse's course, WebCT. Communication is a form of engagement with others and a form of participation which can allow for collaboration. It is again stated that participation is essential in this course, when the tutor says 'this is an essential part of the course activities'.

In extract 6.13 (p. 318) the letters a, b and c indicate the actual task (to participate in the online discussion), which is dependent upon the preparatory activities as described in the previous extracts. The three questions (a, b, and c) start with the sentence 'What, in your opinion...'. Wh-questions, together with the remark 'in your opinion', in addition to

the participation in the discussion forum, allow the students to develop their thoughts about a given theme and to engage with others in a discussion about their ideas and understandings. It is therefore a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning.

However, at the same time, the learning tasks a, b and c can only be performed if the students tick the items in the checklist of activities that they were supposed to perform in order to be able to answer these questions. In addition, the nature of the questions themselves points to a highly structured learning method (didactic discourse) dependent upon the interaction the students have with the course materials (set book and assigned readings).

This shows that in the teaching practices at Syracuse there is a blending of both the didactic and the collaborative learning approaches, used to prompt different actions from the students. This blending of approaches is possible by the shifting of the voices of the tutor, who assume different roles depending on the voices drawn upon. A more authoritative, traditional role of the tutor (the one of a teacher) is achieved by giving explanations, requesting tasks in a very structured way, and is institutionally validated by the way that assessment practices are constructed. On the other hand, the facilitator role of the teacher is achieved by the voice of someone who is offering support and direction throughout the course, and above all, encouraging the students to participate in discussions. Despite being a less authoritative voice, it tends to perform an important role in the conduction of the tasks.

Since different voices pull different discourses, this shifting of voices and roles points to a blending of the different discourses that can be drawn upon in e-learning practices (e.g. institutional, didactic, collaborative). This is the concept of interdiscursivity in practice, which I presented in chapter 3.

Extract 2.13 shows discourses operating interdiscursively and intertextually with one another. It is important to say that although I analysed this extract by having the

paragraph as the unit of analysis, each paragraph is meaningful in relation to the totality of the text, that is, the learning task # 1. Therefore, in the cases in which I found interdiscursivity and intertextuality in the paragraph level, it also applies to the whole text, as interdiscursivity and intertextuality can only be found in context.

One of the most frequent characteristics of this extract is the interdiscursivity of the collaborative learning discourse, the didactic discourse and the institutional discourse. These three discourses are embedded in the practice suggested by this learning activity, instantiated by the language in use.

6.5 Course modules 1-2: the roles of the tutor, assessment and the concept of participation

In this section I present the activity that follows the pre-module of the Syracuse course, which corresponds to Module 1 of the course and consists of two tasks. In these tasks the concept of andragogy and adult learning are being introduced by means of a 'hands-on' experience. The learners are learning about adult learning and andragogy by using an andragogical approach. The tasks presented here are a continuation of the task in the pre-module. The students will have read the suggested readings and, according to the tutor, they will be in a position to decide what they need to learn and how.

In the book 'Andragogy in Action' edited by Knowles (1984), it is suggested that learners have a limited range of options from which to choose at the beginning of most course programmes, when writing their learning contracts. Soon after their work starts, however, they have the option to renegotiate the contracts they made. This is how the Syracuse course presented this andragogic approach to the learners (appendix 6.14, p. 318).

In this situation the voice of the course author is made more visible in the text, as he refers to the facilitator in the third person (e.g. 'work with the facilitator'). The task is

based on a collaborative approach, as the tutor is called facilitator and the students are requested to work with him in the negotiation of their learning contracts.

The task gives the learner the opportunity to write a first draft of the learning contract, receive comments on it and renegotiate it with the course facilitator if necessary. This andragogic/collaborative approach makes the learners work as a peer group for learning. The approach has an individual focus, but at the same time is set to be used in formal educational contexts, where there will almost always be a group of students enrolled in the course; and not necessarily the type of one-to-one tuition. Embedded in this andragogic/collaborative approach are two concepts: a learner-centred approach, as well as the need for collaboration between the peers to agree on the curriculum. These two concepts may sound divergent somehow, as one could ask how a learner-centred approach could be used in a group learning situation, where the students will have different learning desires and needs. But this is what Andragogy, when applied in formal educational contexts, is set to deal with, by using learning contracts:

“The induction process should lead to a point at which participants either commit themselves to the andragogic process and peer learning by agreeing to their contract or decide to withdraw from the course [...] the tutor has special responsibility for enabling the group to become a peer learning group and to help the group begin functioning within the process of dialogue [...] the group must agree on the use and allocation of time, determine criteria for both evaluating process and content and establish procedure for re-negotiation or continuous negotiation to ensure that the needs of all members of the group continue to be met.”

(Allman and Mackie, Nottingham Andragogy Group, 1986:44-45)

At Syracuse, the concepts of participation (peer collaboration) and of a learner-centred pedagogy were frequently explored in the tasks. For example, as in the extract 6.15 (p. 318). Although the task is for the students to create their learning contracts according to their own learning needs, they were asked to share their contracts with the other peer students as a mean of comparison and contrast. I would suggest that a number of

different things are taking place in this type of approach.

First, there is this need for sharing, collaboration. The learners are encouraged to engage with their peer students to discuss the course content and the activities. Second, embedded in this collaborative learning approach there is the concept of 'course participation'. In the data analysed so far in this thesis, course participation is at the heart of the collaborative approach for online learning and is seen as the 'online presence' of the students. It is more than simply doing the course activities, such as the assignments, for example. It has to do with being there, being online; not only as a background presence but actively posting on the discussion forums and replying to the other students' messages, even if there is nothing really significant to be said. Third, there is an institutional perspective framing what can and what cannot be done both by the tutor and by the students. The students have to choose what to study from a pre-set syllabus (a diagnostic form). They can suggest other topics but the tutor has to decide what he can or cannot incorporate in the course. Fourth, there is the way in which the different voices in the tasks shape what is said to enable certain meanings, and particular responses to these meanings. I now discuss each of these four aspects I highlight, bringing in examples from the extract.

In the Syracuse course the principles of andragogy were applied in practice, with the concepts of participation and learner-centred pedagogy being explored through the tasks. Although the task is for the students to create their learning contracts according to their own learning needs, they were asked to share their contracts with the other peer students as a mean of comparison and contrast. Their learning contract must first be a draft and then, after discussing it with the peer students and with the tutor, they could finally have their final contract. This shows that the content of their learning contract would have to somehow reflect the interests of the whole group, and that peer collaboration is essential in this process.

As I have attempted to show in the extracts so far, participation assumes a different meaning in online learning. It is the students' online presence that counts. This suggests that in online teaching and learning, certain aspects, such as participation, are taken as essential, no matter which approach underlies the course design. The collaborative learning approach embeds particular ideological positions and the concept of participation is one of them.

Extract 6.14 shows that it is not enough for the learners to do the task of writing a learning contract: they have also to share it with the facilitator and peer students so that the learners are participating in the course. In a traditional, didactic view of teaching and learning, just by writing a learning contract the students would be considered to be participating in the course. In the online approach to participation, it goes beyond doing the assigned tasks – it involves sharing and commenting on other students' work.

Extract 6.16 (p. 318) provides a good illustration of how discourses are instantiated in practice through language. The institutional discourse in this extract is instantiated in the voice of the tutor as a facilitator. It is still the tutor who decides what will be studied, no matter how much the andragogic approach tries to open up the process to a joint syllabus construction. Words like 'majority', 'efforts', 'pre-planned' and 'necessary' (6.16) reinforce that the course has been planned and that changes can be negotiated, but under a set of rules that include: 1) changes will be made if the majority of the students feel the same need; 2) the tutor needs to be willing to make those changes and to make the effort to incorporate them to the course; c) making changes mean altering a pre-planned system; 4) the pre-planned system will only be altered if necessary. These rules impose barriers to the change-making process; indicating it is not a very straightforward process. These barriers are embedded in the institutional discourse, which defines what can or cannot be said, and what can or cannot be done.

In the language used in the institutional discourse, words such as majority, efforts, pre-

planned and necessary have specific connotations. Majority alludes to the fact that no matter what decision about the course needs to be taken, the focus is always on the group and not on individual students. It is typical of a university structure to have group tuition rather than individual instruction – the latter would increase the costs of running a university too much, making the final price of a course extremely high and unaffordable to the students. The fact that changes can only be made if the majority of the students feel the same need is because, no matter how individualised it sets out to be, it is a group learning system based on a formal academic setting, which has to suit all the learners equally. If a few learners do not wish to dedicate some of their course time to study a topic suggested by a fellow student than it simply cannot happen. In addition to that, a further step is that the tutor has to be compliant with the suggested changes. He is the voice of power and the changes will depend upon his efforts against the pre-planned system. The word pre-planned here indicates that there is someone who makes decisions and has power over what is studied – this someone can be for example the tutor or the course author, or even both. It is this person in power who has a final say about what and how much of it can be covered in the time available and at what level and to what purpose. This pre-planned system for the curriculum, therefore, can only be changed if there is a real need for it. Appendix 6.17 (p. 318) is an extract from the interview with the course tutor, who acknowledges this point. After acknowledging the institutional rules of the course, Robert argues (6.18, p. 319) that the syllabus can be negotiated only to a certain extent. If the students want to study things that would take a longer period of time than the one allocated in the course calendar it is simply not possible to run the course to fit the university calendar. As I discussed in part I of this chapter, the word ‘artificiality’ indicates that the students might have the idea that they are in control, but in fact they are not.

The institutional discourse also establishes limitations on the tutor with regard to what can be done, a fact that extract 6.19 helps explain, with the tutor saying that he will try to make the suggested changes. My interpretation here is that because the timing of the course and the frequency of the online tutorials (or course length) are pre-defined (as is the syllabus to a certain extent) it is difficult for the tutor to include more content in the course, although he is trying to accommodate most 'pressing needs' of the learners. In extract 6.16 (appendix 3, p. 318) referring to *necessity* brings with it a value judgement – the tutor will be judging whether the suggested changes by the students are really necessary, whether the students need to learn what they asked to learn, and whether they are able to do so. Again it places the tutor in the role of a teacher, the one who has the power to decide what can be studied.

6.5.1 Intertextuality eliciting meanings

The fourth aspect I want to show in module 1 is that of intertextuality, and of how the different voices in the tasks shape certain meanings, and specific responses to these meanings.

In the andragogic and collaborative approaches the tutor should act as a facilitator, not as teacher. In the data, when the tutor says that the final draft of the learning contract *should* be submitted for all to read, his sentence shows authority, by telling the students what they are expected to do and leaving them little choice. The tutor is assuming the voice of a teacher, not that of a facilitator. Also, the students have already been told in the pre-module of the course that all the activities count as course participation, and therefore count towards their final mark. The students might then feel obliged to post their contract drafts to the discussion board, as a way of guaranteeing a mark for participation in this activity to count towards the end of the course.

The use of modal verbs such as should (or must) have been identified in the beginning of this analysis as markers of a didactic approach. The general understanding of how the course should be designed, offered and taken is constructed through language. It is through particular language choices and through the shifting of voices that a number of 'texts' commonly known in given discourses can be found in others. This is intertextuality in practice.

Extract 6.20 (p. 319) illustrates the use of a traditional, didactic approach of teaching and learning applied to a collaborative learning activity, and how intertextuality – the voices of facilitator and teacher in the text – can play an important role in shaping the desired actions. In the extract above, again the tutor acts as a teacher, telling the students what to do. The students can decide how to do the task, but even for that they were given limited options from which to choose. In this extract the tutor uses the voice of the teacher to teach them how to do the task, in a very didactic way, even by providing examples to serve as guides on how to do the task. In this extract there is also the use of the imperatives 'read', and 'study', which are typical ways of teachers speaking in the didactic discourse. This extract is very similar to 6.12, which seems to suggest that this strategy of adopting a more didactic approach to trigger a collaborative task can be a characteristic of the language of the tasks in this case study.

The use of the imperative tense in the sentences, however, is not exclusive to the didactic discourse. It is possible for a task to trigger collaborative learning and to be written with the use of imperatives. What seems to make the imperatives a characteristic of either discourse is the context, and how the voice of the tutor shifts between different roles.

6.6 The learning contract

At the beginning of the chapter I highlighted the two concepts embedded in the andragogic approach: collaboration and self-directness. In both approaches assessment practices play an important role in motivating the students' participation in the course. I showed examples of the important role of collaboration in this approach but I have not showed specific examples of self-directness. In this data analysis the self-directedness of the students comes in contrast to the lack of self-directness in relation to the Unis@Digital ones, but in both cases the assessment practices, either by self-directed activities (self-assessment of previous knowledge) or tutor led assessment (when the tutor gives the mark) have similar goals, the one of motivating the student participation in the course and the one of accrediting the learning experience.

Knowles (1984:8) discusses the concept of the learner in both the pedagogical and andragogic models. In the first, the learner is a dependent personality, for the pedagogical model assigns all the responsibilities for decision making about what is to be learned to the teacher. In the latter, the learner is regarded as self-directed and able to assess their level of knowledge with the support of the tutor. Knowles argues that adult educators have increasingly been devising strategies for helping adults make the transition from being dependent learners to being self-directed learners. An aspect of an andragogic approach is that self-directed study skills have to be developed in the learners. Eldred (1984:135) presents graduation criteria for self-directed learners. In terms of self-directness, it is said:

“Self-directed study skills: You will need to present evidence which demonstrates your ability to design and carry out study projects of your own choosing. In order to meet this requirement, you will need to evidence the following conceptual and practical skills: a) question-asking ability; b) appropriate resource identification and use; c) ability to develop suitable rationales for studies undertaken; d) willingness and ability to engage in self-evaluation in studies pursued; and e) an ability to pursue

such studies in a self-directed manner wherein the student is the primary initiator of learning activity.”

(Eldred, 1984:135)

In module 2 it is possible to find some of these principles of self-directness embedded in the task, when the students are asked to rank their existing knowledge in order to create their learning contract (appendix 6.21, p. 319). In this extract the students are asked to complete their self-rating by ranking the topics suggested in the diagnostic form to be part of the course syllabus according to their perceived level of knowledge: from ‘high’ to ‘I don’t know’ or ‘low’. This task is passing on responsibilities to the students and they are making decisions about their learning process. At Unis@Digital, this type of reflection happened as an end-of-course- questionnaire (institutional evaluation) rather than something embedded in the course approach. This suggests that similar tasks can operate within different discourses and serve different purposes.

Modules 1-2 explored the principles of andragogy/collaborative learning in practice in the data. It showed that at the heart of the andragogic approach are two concepts, collaboration and self-directness, which are also a constant theme within the most recent online teaching and learning techniques.

Through the tasks of modules 1-2 I discussed how andragogy prompts a ‘need for collaboration’, and as result I attempted to show how the collaborative approach calls for course participation in the data and how intertextuality in the texts enact meanings. I now move on to discuss the following modules, 3 to 5.

6.7 Participation, the role of the tutor and assessment in modules 3-5

In this section I discuss the data of the remaining modules of the Syracuse course. In module five most communications were exchanged via personal emails between the

tutor and the students, therefore I did not have access to them. The data I have for module five however is the personal interview with the tutor, in which he mentions the outcomes of the module. Module three consists of a mid-term progress assessment report and module four consists of an organizational audit activity. Running alongside these modules are the online seminars I mentioned in the introduction to part II in this chapter.

6.7.1 A didactic approach to e-learning

In modules 3-5 most of the language used is typical of the didactic approach. In 6.22 (p. 320) Robert clarifies to the students that this is the mid-point of the course and that therefore he would like to have the course evaluated and the students self-assessed. Robert compares this assessment, which is embedded in the course syllabus, to a traditional exam. The tutor himself posts his evaluation of the course progress in the main modules area and then asks the students to do the same.

Although he says it is not a traditional exam, this assessment acts as a precise guide and control instrument for the rest of the course. It therefore works like a traditional exam, which will allow the tutor and the institution to assess how much the students have learned and whether or not they have achieved the expected goals. The difference is that depending on the results of this self-assessment, the necessary changes to the course approach will be identified in time to be changed for its second half. The students will also have the chance to reflect upon their own learning process and needs. This illustrates the application of a more andragogic approach to the teaching of adults, one in which self-reflection and reassessments of goals are crucial elements.

In his personal assessment of the course progress (6.22, p. 324), Roberts' identity shifts between that of facilitator and that of teacher. I show that the view of the tutor as a

facilitator, as put forward in the online learning literature, is not always accurate. This facilitator role is the identity he is assuming through that choice of language in that particular context, and this identity implies specific power relations. A facilitator is more likely to share the power to make decisions with the students, whereas a teacher, in the traditional role of teaching the students, holds more power in terms of making decisions than the students. The extract below illustrates this, with Robert assuming the voice of the facilitator and sharing responsibility for assessment with the students by looking at their progress reports:

In module 3 (6.23, p. 320) Robert is more open to negotiate the assessment criteria and opens up the opportunity for discussing the learners' needs individually. However, he clearly states that he had expectations regarding the students' progress on the course, but he is not sure they are being met (6.24, p. 320). Although Robert takes up the voice of a teacher again, he tries to share the responsibility for learning with the students. He uses 'we' to emphasise he is part of the group; it is a rhetorical way of telling the students they are not alone. He articulates this positioning in order to lead the students to his desired meanings, and assumes different identities through his word choices, which blend together in his discourse. Fairclough (2003) argues that the use of the first person plural pronoun 'we' is important in terms of *identificational meanings*, which relates to the textual construction of people's identities (identificatory).

The tutor's role of checking and controlling whether the students have read the assigned readings is very much in line with the role of a teacher – the one who somehow needs to check the understanding of the concepts and whether or not the students are doing their 'homework', and in this extract Robert draws upon the voice of a teacher. Robert also makes the power relation between the online tutor and the students more evident. He points out that he will be responsible for grading the individual students' participation, which is also the role of a teacher in a conventional setting. But when he establishes

deadlines, or states that the course is running a week behind schedule, he shifts to the role of a facilitator, a figure more closely related to providing reassurance that the course is running as it should, rather than focusing on the learning process itself. Extract 6.25 (p. 320) explores this idea.

In the above extract Robert shifts his role again, this time to the voice of the facilitator. He uses the inclusive 'we' four times, reinforcing this idea that he is part of the group, part of this 'community' that is learning something together.

In this Syracuse course, the way the course content was delivered was by asking the students to read two set books, along with others of their choosing. However, the way Robert was using to assess or to verify whether the students had done so was by means of the discussion forum. The discussion forum, then, works as a thermometer for individual progress, just like graded assignments would do in another context.

This way of assessing learning, interestingly, is carried out just like in courses with the assignment component, in which the students are expected to write their answers in the assignments based on the bibliography presented in the course or taught by the tutor in class. The discussion forum also had a similar role at Unis@Digital. This practice resembles the transmission model of education, that familiar view of assessment in which the students have to 'refund' the institution with all the knowledge that has been 'paid in' to their academic accounts. In this case, it is a 'refund' that should be made visible to everyone in the discussion forum area. This raises again the question of participation in online courses.

Extract 6.26 (p. 321) presents the tutor's assessment of the course progress, and students' participation by means of the discussion forum. In this extract Robert clearly states that he intends to perform both a qualitative and a quantitative analysis of the students' contributions to the discussion forum. Again, this is usually a role assumed by

a teacher, who wants to verify the completion of the course tasks according to the expectations regarding outcomes.

However, Robert shifts his role again to facilitator, when he explains step-by-step what the students had to do to open 'all' messages in the discussion forum area, and used 'the language of instruction' by saying things such as 'Go into', 'Make sure that you select', 'click' among other instructions. This role shift is marked by the language choice he uses in order to create the activities he expected. In the extract below he shifts again to the role of a facilitator, asking 'Do I have to do all the work?'

In extracts 6.26 the collaborative learning discourse is present in the speech of the tutor as he frequently talks about the collaborative nature of the activity proposed, the online discussion forum. However, the actual word choices and the tone of his comments resemble a didactic discourse: it is a way of telling the students that they are expected to do certain things in certain ways, and that they will get marks for doing so.

In 6.27 (p. 321) the tutor focuses on the need of the students to be provoked by the discussion postings: In his view the aim of a discussion forum is to be provocative enough to create a heated discussion, one that in his words would 'catch fire'. This idea of the discussion forum as a place in which students participate in the online course is based on the premise of collaborative learning, that learners must build their knowledge together. Like in Unis@Digital, the amount of participation in the discussion forum is what defines whether a course was successful or not. This concern is explored in 6.27.

Collaborative learning is the approach the tutor claims to be underlying his approach to teaching and learning online, as in 6.27 he mentions key expressions such as 'share ideas', 'collaborate in the construction of our knowledge' and 'collaborative group-think'. There is a focus on participation, in which 'every one of the participants', as the extract above shows, should be engaged in the activities. Again, it is not enough for the students to read the course materials and share their understandings with the other participants:

they must enquire, agree, disagree and look for other sorts of engagement with the content that would enable a heated online discussion. Participation, once more, means more than taking the course: it means being present online, and above all participating in the discussion forum by taking a position, agreeing or disagreeing with the other students, and enquiring into the course content. However, although there is the use of key words from the collaborative learning domain, the teaching approach is more based upon a didactic approach (6.27, p. 321).

The tutor talks about a quantitative criterion for assessing the level of contribution to the discussion forum area from each participant. He counted and tabulated the number of messages posted by each participant in the forums. Although he says he does not like to have to think about online discussion participation in a quantitative way, he says it is necessary in order to keep the discussion going. For Robert, the small number of postings do not allow for these contributions to be properly assessed (6.28, p. 322).

The tutor talks about *quantity, judgment, minimum limits, quality of contributions, paper trail*. Each one of these items can be explored within a didactic way of teaching, where assessment is very important and it is the role of a teacher to judge against certain criteria. These criteria, then, can be quantity and/or quality. But Robert claims he can only assess quality by having enough quantity. For him, the two are inter-related, and he also needs to keep some kind of paper trail as proof of what he assessed. Keeping records of the students' performance by means of paper work (exams, assignments, etc) is a very didactic way of teaching, in which, to use the banking concept of Paulo Freire (1970), the teacher has the 'deposit receipt'. In a collaborative learning environment, where knowledge is created by peer interaction, it is more difficult to keep a record of what the students do and how they learn, unless the tutor (or the virtual learning environment system) sets up systems for message tracking. This type of message tracking system is very often used by online tutors. It is not clear whether Robert did

use such a system (he said he 'gave himself the trouble to count and tabulate' the messages), or whether he used a more 'manual' way of doing the same job. The point is that, by doing so, he was setting up some sort of online surveillance of the students' activities. Land and Bayne (2004) address this issue of online surveillance specifically in e-learning contexts:

"As in so many arenas, computers have enabled us to do things that were previously impossible or very difficult. VLE surveillance tools record every move a student makes within the learning space, and provide intimate details of every student's working hours and patterns of study [...] within VLEs surveillance is a casual act – sophisticated and detailed reports on individual students can be obtained with a couple of mouse clicks [...] Surveillance for Foucault is an element of the hierarchical observation which is a key instrument of disciplinary power. Hierarchical observation binds the concepts of visibility and power. There is an unequal power relationship between the seer and the seen – the visibility of the seen enables the seer to 'know' them, to alter them. Access to this knowledge, to this power, is of course unevenly distributed."

(Land & Bayne, 2004)

Land and Bayne (2004) address the issue of online surveillance, and arguing that certain uses of technology may lead to 'technological determinism'. They claim that although technology makes available all sorts of tools for surveillance, they should be used with awareness of their effects, and point to the uneven power relation in such practices. The teacher is the one who watches the students and decides on the marks to be given. In such cases, the institutional discourse comes into play, and it is when the *paper trail* example seems to be a necessary component in the assessment practices.

Extract 6.28 and the considerations of Land and Bayne (2004) regarding online surveillance allow us to see a connection between course participation and surveillance in the Syracuse data. It also helps us to see the Foucauldian concept of power operating in the course. Power, in this context, operates in a networked way, as mentioned in chapter 3. It means that from the moment the tutor brings the awareness to the students

that the amount of times they access the course environment is being monitored, the students will probably be more conscious of their participation in the course and will start to monitor themselves the number of their accesses.

In such *paper trail* instances the tutor may call himself a facilitator but in fact he is assuming the role of a teacher. The voice is the one of the teacher, disguised within the collaborative learning approach, and looking for individual contributions in the discussion forums of a certain participation rate. The position of the tutor shifts within these two roles. They are drawn upon in accordance with the tutor's wishes, with each providing support for certain actions he wishes to implement.

In the Syracuse case study I show how different approaches (and therefore different discourses) interplay in the course design and delivery. The voice of the tutor constantly shifts between the tutor as a facilitator or teacher (and sometimes it is the course authors' voice that is embedded in the text) and the therefore the tutor assumes different roles. Course participation is an important theme also in this case study. Robert points to the need of students' participation in his interview, and I did find strong evidence of it in the course data. And finally, assessment is also a theme that permeates through all e-learning practices in this case study. Although not all the tasks were graded like in Unis@Digital, it was the combination of three factors that influenced the final pass mark of the learner: the learning contract, the participation in the forum and the final project. From the beginning of the course, the students were working towards a pre-defined final grade.

In the next chapter I discuss both analysis and how they address each of my research questions.

7 *Discussion of the data analysis*

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the data analysis from the two case studies. I bring together the main ideas that arose in both analyses, and attempt to relate them to the research questions by focusing on issues of practice.

I discuss the research questions under the themes that emerged from my empirical analysis: participation, assessment and the role of the tutor. By looking at how these themes appeared in my data and how they relate to one another in both case studies, I try to explore the ways in which it is possible to use a discursive perspective to look at the teaching practices in e-learning.

7.2 Participation

Participation was a recurrent theme in both my case studies. As argued in the analysis chapters, the concept of participation seems to be embedded in the collaborative learning discourse. However, it seems that there is more to it than the collaborative learning as an approach to teaching may suggest when it comes to practice.

In both case studies, there have been recurrent attempts to make collaborative learning work by means of getting students engaging and arguing in the online environment. Sometimes, the way the course was designed and presented to the students had

an implicit intention of triggering collaboration, but in practice the results were not as expected.

At Unis@Digital, for example, the intention of drawing on collaborative learning as the main approach underlying the teaching and learning practices was made explicit in the institutional document. However, in practice, collaboration between the students did not seem to take place. There could be various reasons for this, but the reason that was most evident to me was that the practices were driven not only by the collaborative learning discourse but also by other discourses, such as the didactic and the institutional. The way these discourses interoperate in practice did not support the practices to take place in the desired ways.

This is why it seems important to understand how these other discourses, which may not always be as evident as the collaborative learning, help shape the practices. I mentioned that at Unis@Digital, collaborative learning did not seem to work as expected. Most of the time the students were doing the tasks individually, and even when they were participating in the online forum, there did not seem to be much engagement to exchange information and construct knowledge. Likewise, at Syracuse, although the learners were more experienced with e-learning, and to a certain extent seemed to be expecting to work collaboratively, it is not possible to say for sure that collaborative learning took place, because the data seem to suggest otherwise. The tutor at Syracuse, for example, seems to think that collaboration was not happening (or at least not enough), as is shown in extract (6.26, p. 321) when he explains that he would like to have seen the discussions to 'catch fire'.

I would suggest that the difficulties faced in making collaborative learning work in these case studies were partly because of the presence of the institutional discourse and partly because of the presence of the didactic discourse in the practices. I shall address the institutional discourse first. Both institutions, Unis@Digital and Syracuse, seemed to

believe that an online course was successful when there was student collaboration in the discussion forums, and this is why participation became such an important theme throughout. The institutions, therefore, needed evidence of such collaborations to be able to argue for course success. To a certain extent, a lot of what has happened in the ways the course tasks were conducted was related to an attempt to make the collaborations work and appear as evidence in the forums.

It could be argued, therefore, that although the institutional discourse may not be as evident as the collaborative learning discourse to the tutors and course authors, this discourse was underpinning the ways in which the tasks were conducted as much as the collaborative learning discourse itself. However, it is only possible to understand how the institutional discourse affects the practice if we look also into the other discourse that was interplaying in the practices, the didactic discourse.

The didactic works at different levels in the practices, because to a certain extent it is rooted in both the tutors' and learners' perceptions of what formal education is or should be like. To many students, as in the case of Unis@Digital, this had been the only type of educational experience they had had so far, one in which a traditional way of teaching was the normal practice. The educational psychologist of Unis@Digital, Sara, argued it herself, when she explained that the learners were expecting from an online course a similar experience to what they were used to in their face-to-face courses (appendix 2, underlined, p. 293).

In relation to the tutors (Robert and I), not only have they most likely been exposed to the didactic discourse as learners themselves, but also they had the institutional discourse somehow delineating what they need to do, through the requests of the course coordinators, for example. To a certain extent, the tutors pass these expectations onto the learners in the ways in which they are conducting the tasks. Robert, for example, knew that there were a limited number of students in the course (6) and that

because of that the discussions were not likely to be as intensive as they could be if the number of students were higher. Nevertheless, he showed his disappointment with what he considered a lack of engagement of the learners with the discussion forum task.

The didactic discourse then is that type of discourse that attempts to 'make things happen' in the e-learning practices. Whether it is by telling the students what to do (i.e. read *x* text, now discuss question *b* with the peer learners etc), or by telling them what to study (i.e. read *x* book, by *z* author); the didactic discourse seems to have the property of bringing about the 'authority of knowledge'. This authority of knowledge has traditionally being represented by the figure of the teacher. Occasionally, it is also represented by the figure of the author of a book, for example, as books tend to be seen in education as diffusers of authoritative knowledge (i.e. in both case studies there were 'set books').

But it is not only the tutors that are affected by both the institutional and the didactic discourse. Course authors, likewise, may have had similar traditional educational experiences in their upbringing and are also under the influence of what the institution sets as acceptable and desirable in terms of practices. When Maria, for example, wrote the Research Methods course for Unis@Digital, she not only tried to comply with the university requirement for students online collaboration but also let some of her own implicit theoretical understanding of how the learning tasks should be done to appear in the ways she designed the tasks. Therefore, both tutors and course authors seem to be highly influenced by these discourses in their practices.

These implicit theoretical understanding that I mention above are commonsense theories on teaching and learning, based on the understanding that the teacher has the knowledge and the learner has not. This is how, traditionally, formal education is seen to be. This way of seeing learning as content acquisition is not always made explicit and is difficult to uncover, in part because it reflects this common sense.

The didactic approach differs from other teaching and learning approaches in the sense that it is centred on the teacher and not on the learner's needs. The learner is expected to demonstrate exactly what they have been taught. It is an approach to teaching and learning which complies with an institutionalised view of learning, with measurable learning outcomes, and in which the assessment is one of the main driving forces in the design of the course activities.

In terms of e-learning, with the growing popularity of collaborative learning, the measurable outcomes do not seem to be achieved only by high marks in the assessments' and exams, but also (and as importantly) through the participation of the students in the discussion forums and other collaborative activities that can be seen and measured in the learning environment. This participation is usually realised in groups, in the form of activities that require the learner to interact with other students in order to perform a course task. Learners who participate in group activities and discussions with their peer learners tend to be favoured in the assessment marks. In my case studies, participation is a concept embedded in the course pedagogies for course delivery. Due to the capacity of the technology to facilitate communication online, encouraging students' participation in group work and discussion forum seems to have become a part of the good practices of the field, or they were certainly understood as such in the cases I presented in this thesis. The learning environment, therefore, is the site in which one can physically see the online course in action, and supposedly, where evidence of course participation can be gathered and shown as a measure of course success.

In this line of thought, I would argue that the element of 'teaching' in e-learning is nearly always there, no matter how well the tutor performs this 'facilitator-only' role. In fact, Unis@Digital seems to have used the appropriate terminology to refer to the tutor: teacher-facilitator. In my case studies, this was exactly the role of the tutor, a blend

between a teacher and a facilitator. It may be the case that there is more to the facilitator role than one can initially see in the literature of collaborative learning. Facilitating a course seems to involve not only guidance, but also an element of teaching in order to 'make things happen'. The teaching aspect usually comes through in the language of the tasks and, even more often, in the specific ways in which the tutor communicates with the learners to make a learning task happen in practice. In these instances of personal communications with the learners, these implicit theories about learning are made more evident through the language in use.

In the analysis of my own practice I identified the didactic discourse instantiated in the language of my communications with the students in a number of occasions. One example is when I discuss extract 5.22 (p.275), in which I give a lengthy explanation about the concept of truth in science. In this extract the didactic discourse can be seen operating at the level of practice, through the language of the task. My goal there was to trigger a discussion between the students about the topic, and in order to achieve this I drew upon the didactic discourse. I did some teaching about the concept of truth so that the students would have something to think about and start a discussion. This shows that my own implicit understanding of how I, as a teacher-facilitator, should teach the students is coming through my 'teacher's voice' in practice; that embedded idea that the teacher has the knowledge to offer to the students. This is the premise in which the whole educational system is based upon, in which through formal education the students will hopefully gain some knowledge that they did not have before, and I am not suggesting that there is anything wrong with it. What I am arguing is that the didactic discourse seems to be an intrinsic part of the educational system, and of the ways in which tutors, course authors and learners seem to understand the practices associated with this discourse as expected and desirable.

An example from Syracuse, in which the didactic discourse can be seen operating when the aim was for a collaborative learning task to take place, was when Robert explained why the learners should read the set book (extract 6.11, p. 317). Here is the idea of the 'authority of knowledge' that I discussed earlier. He argues that although the book had been written many years ago, it was still relevant for the course. The tutor himself was a co-author of the book, and was speaking to the learners with the voice of a teacher, with the authority of someone who knows the content that the students wish to learn. However, in order to prompt a collaboration activity, he asked the students to also look for another sources of information in order to gather the most recent information about that content. As I argued previously, in discourse theory 'what is said is said against of what is unsaid'. In this instance, what is unsaid but implicit (at least to the tutor) is that the students should share their findings about the most update theories they found both with the tutor and with the peer learners.

I hope that with this brief discussion of these extracts I am being able to demonstrate how the three discourses, the didactic, the collaborative learning and the institutional, are constantly interplaying, and how they help to construct the practices. In terms of participation, it seems that participation is used as one of the practical ways in which to encourage the students to doing collaborative learning, but the ways in which the students are encouraged to participate are constituted of the two other discourses (didactic and institutional), and not only of the collaborative learning.

7.3 Assessment

Assessment practices are intrinsically related to the didactic discourse and the institutional discourse, because they are a way of gathering measurable outcomes. Assessment may happen formally, by means of a specific assignment or exam, but also

informally, by means of continuing assessment. Participation in the discussion forums, for example, in both cases were used as form of continuing assessment, although it was more evident at Unis@Digital than at Syracuse. Most learning tasks in both case studies had marks attributed to them, which would be given to the students when the tasks were performed successfully. If the marks were not explicit (in the case of Unis@Digital, for example, at the end of each question or task the learners would know how many points they could get by answering them), then they were a type of implicit mark, to be decided by the tutor, upon assessing the overall participation of the learner in the discussion activities.

Robert, for example, used a quantitative criterion to assess the students' participation (extract 6.28, p. 322). He used a statistical method to count and tabulate the students' participation in the forum, and found out that the students had posted an average of two contributions per question each, which in his view was extremely low. Although the students were not getting marks 'per question answered' they had a commitment in their learning contract to achieve a certain level of knowledge and to perform certain tasks in the course, amongst which was participating in the course forums. Therefore, if the participation in the forum was low, the students could potentially lose marks in their final score because of it. And again, in this example, the main goal was to prompt a collaborative learning activity. Robert says that it is his experience that even a small group of students can create an interesting discussion, if they all get involved. And as a result, there would be lots of input from everyone and a way to create some "collaborative group-thinking" (appendix 6.27, p. 321).

In terms of formal assessment, the learning contract is what was mostly defining the assessment practices at Syracuse, and also the option for a final course assignment if the students wished to, depending on the final grade they were pursuing. However, from the beginning of the course, Robert made it clear that the activity number 1 of the course,

entitled 'Course participation', would continue throughout the course (appendix 6.7). In this case study, and also at Unis@Digital, participation and assessment are two themes linked together. 'Course participation' can be both in the form of formal or informal assessment, and seems to be helping to shape how e-learning practices take place, at the same time contributing to meet an important institutional criteria which is to achieve course success.

The didactic discourse, however, due to its intrinsic nature based on the acquisition model of learning, seems to be more closely related to assessment practices than the collaborative learning discourse. In relation to the institutional discourse, one could argue that it is also present in assessment practices, in the sense that assessment is a pre-requisite of the institutions to recognise formal learning; they need measurable outcomes.

7.4 The role of the tutor

The most important aspect of my analysis that I wish to emphasise here is that the role of the tutor changes according to what the tutor is aiming to achieve. The tutor is said to be a facilitator in the collaborative learning approach. However, since there is not much of the collaborative approach in practice in my data, but attempts to achieving it, I argue that the role of the tutor does not fall only into the facilitator category. The role of the tutor shifts alongside the shifts of the voices that take place during the course presentation, through the language of the tasks.

By drawing on different voices the tutor opens up the possibility of playing different roles in the teaching and learning process, as well as drawing on different levels of authority in relation to the students, depending on the actions the tutor wishes the learners to take. As well as the voices representing the tutor acting as facilitator and

tutor acting as a teacher in the data, I also showed how sometimes it is the voice of the course author that is doing the work in the text. The voice of the course author appears in different ways in the language of the tasks. For example, in extract 6.15 it does the work of making the utterance appear more authoritative, allowing less room for discussion. In that passage, Maria asks the learners to send their critical summaries to the teacher-facilitator, "so the teacher can understand it", she says. By using a third person in the language of the task, it meant that someone other than the tutor had written the task. It is convenient for the tutor to let this voice appear as a third party voice, because then the request feels more like an institutional demand (therefore more difficult to question) rather than a tutor's own preference, which could be more easily challenged by the students. The course author's voice is usually closely related to the institutional discourse, because it represents what the institution expects from the learners. However, the ways in which the course author's voice is constructed in the tasks can instantiate either the didactic discourse or the collaborative learning discourse, depending on the context. In the example I mentioned above, it is a voice of authority, therefore connected to the institutional discourse, but also intertextual with the didactic discourse, because of the teaching tone adopted by the author when telling the students what to do; a tone that aimed to justify the 'why' of that request.

In my data analysis, I problematised the fact that the learners do not always know who is speaking in the language of the tasks in e-learning. But, as far as my study is concerned, I cannot offer a plausible insight on this matter because it was not the aim of my research. However, I feel it is appropriate to show that there is such complexity taking place in my data. Personally, as a tutor, I felt that it was important to let the students know that I had not written or designed the course myself. I felt it was a good way to distance myself from the content and the course design and to concentrate on 'making things happen' in terms of the students completing the tasks.

It is therefore feasible to say that the language used in the context of teaching and learning online is a language that allows for this role shifting. It is a language inserted in history, it carries an ideological load and is typical of the profession – both tutors in the case studies presented use similar language constructions to enact meanings that are seen as desirable in the e-learning context. Enabling the shifting of roles by drawing on different voices is, therefore, a characteristic of the language used in the e-learning practices in my data.

7.5 Revisiting the research questions

I believe that throughout my data analysis and in this chapter I have demonstrated how the language of the tasks underpin e-learning practices and how both the didactic and the institutional discourses contribute to the shaping of collaborative learning practices in e-learning. During my discussion in this section these questions will arise again, but I will mainly concentrate on discussing my third research question, about how a discursive perspective on e-learning can help to bridge the gap between academic theory and pedagogical practice.

I start by proposing that a discursive perspective on e-learning has the potential to help in a number of different ways. Firstly, by raising the awareness within institutions, and to course authors and tutors that despite the preference for a chosen teaching approach (in my case studies, the collaborative approach) there are other discourses influencing the ways in which the practices come into action. My case studies revealed that the didactic discourse and the institutional discourse are powerful discourses, that although possibly less evident than the collaborative learning one, still contribute to the shaping of the practices as they were. By having an awareness of 'what else' helps to shape the practices in e-learning, besides the chosen teaching approach, both course authors and

tutors may be able to make more informed choices in terms of both course design and tasks' presentation and conduction. The e-learning teaching practices in my case studies showed that these practices are intrinsically embedded in such discourses (as much as the discourses are embedded in the practices), and therefore it is natural that the outcomes of the practices will not be clear-cut located in the domain of collaborative learning. Having this awareness can potentially help tutors, course authors and designers to think of 'course participation' from different angles and also to reduce the anxiety in relation to what is considered a successful performance of the collaborative approach in e-learning.

Knowing that successful collaborative learning practices are not only dependent upon the tutors' own ability to empathize with the students (and vice-versa) for example, so that the students would take part in the discussions, is an advantage. Also, knowing that successful collaborative learning does not seem to rely entirely in their ability to design 'good questions' can also potentially help to reduce the tutors' anxiety about the students participating in the discussion forums.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I would suggest, is that this discursive perspective on e-learning practices can potentially offer practitioners and researchers a 'way', or a 'tool' in which to think about e-learning practices. Thinking of discourses as tools to understand the practices can be a powerful perspective one can take to explore the most complex aspects of this mismatch between academic theory and pedagogical practice. 'Academic theory', here, means both what the institutions document or preach with regards to what should be done in terms of teaching, which is to say, the perspectives and approaches to teaching and learning that are institutionally accepted and desired. It can also mean what the teaching approach in question (in my study, the collaborative learning) seems to be offering at the level of practice; that is, the description of what the approach is proposing.

Attempting to bridge the gap between academic theory and pedagogical practice in e-learning practices can be very challenging, because first one needs to understand the nature of this gap. It may be that this 'gap' is not about academic theory and pedagogical practice, but about people's commonsense about how to teach and how to learn. For example, a tutor may understand theoretically what collaborative learning is about, but when it comes to practice it may be that this theoretical knowledge is superseded by other commonsense practices that can be rooted in a variety of places: on the tutor's own way of thinking (i.e. due to the educational tradition they are used to); in the students' way of thinking and in their expectations (as in the case of Unis@Digital, where they expected to be taught in traditional ways); in the course author's way of thinking (when the author draws on the didactic discourse and designs tasks that do not trigger as much collaboration as expected); in the institution way of thinking, (by the fact that although the institution may support collaborative learning it still needs to comply with rules in terms of assessment practices, for example); or even at a broader level, on a societal one, by the ways in which educational practices are expected to happen (i.e. educational outcomes need to be measurable in order to formal learning to be accredited). At Unis@Digital for example, a lot of what the teaching approach proposed was delineated according to what the Brazilian Ministry of Education expected to see as evidence of course success to enable the accreditation of the institution to offer e-learning courses.

What I am arguing is that this 'gap' may be located in different places and this is why it is a complex task to understand its nature. A discursive perspective on e-learning practices can help us see the various levels in which this gap may be located, which in relation to the diagram I presented on page 96, may be located in the top level (i.e. in the social order or in the order of discourse) or lower down the diagram, when it comes to the role of the individuals (tutors, course authors and learners) in the actual practices.

Independently of where the gap may be located in that diagram, it is inevitably spread throughout the system, because all those aspects of discourse are interrelated, and affect each other both top-down and bottom-up. This is the premise of the cyclical nature of the discourse, where practice affects discourse and discourse affects practice.

Thirdly, this discursive perspective on e-learning practices also offers us a way in which to distinguish between perspectives that are set to be the common practice of an educational institution (i.e. a didactic approach to teaching or the collaborative learning approach) and tutors, course authors and learners' perspectives that are based on commonsense, but nevertheless have great impact on what happens in practice.

I hope that I have addressed my research questions within this reflection I provide in this section, and particularly question number three, about how a discursive perspective on e-learning can help to bridge the gap between academic theory and pedagogical practice. Throughout the thesis I attempted to show that the language of the tasks, independently of institutional documentation and expectations, underpin the practices because they carry the embedded discourses that circulate within those practices. I also attempted to show that both the didactic and the institutional discourses contribute to shaping how collaborative learning happens in practice because they are discourses rooted both in the nature of the educational system and teaching traditions, and in the ways in which individuals (tutors, learners, course authors, students) are used to operating. These individuals may be used to operate within the didactic discourse for example, as in the case of the commonsense perspectives that I discussed above, or it may be that these are the only possible discourses that are available for them to draw on in order to perform their roles of tutor, course author, learner etc. For example, the institution delineates the boundaries of what is expected from the tutor. Likewise, the educational system delineates the boundaries of what is expected from educational institutions and so on. In this sense, there seems to be only a limited number of

discourses that can be drawn upon to perform the teaching and learning practices in e-learning, at least according to what my data shows.

In the final chapter I discuss the implications and limitations of this study, and point to possible further research.

8 *A discursive perspective on e-learning practices*

In this concluding chapter I revisit the trajectory of the research, by summarising how I developed my line of thought during my analysis. I also address both the contributions of this study and its limitations, and then point to possible directions for further research.

8.1 A discursive perspective on e-learning practices

When I started this study my aim was to explore some speculative theories I had regarding e-learning practices. These speculative theories had developed over the years through my own personal experience as a distance learner and as both a face-to-face and e-learning tutor.

Interestingly, during my investigative process, my focus shifted from what I considered to be important issues in e-learning, such as courses being sold as 'packages' and the lack of flexibility in negotiating the syllabus, to more complex issues deeply imbricated in the actual teaching practices, such as the role of discourses in shaping e-learning practices.

This shift in my research interest was processual. It came about through an engagement with my data, with my own practice and the practices of everyone else involved in

the case studies I carried out. My main concern became that of understanding the nature of the e-learning practices: what was it that made the practices the ways they were. This understanding would hopefully help me to see beyond what seemed to be commonsense and beyond my own speculation.

As in most qualitative studies, the process was very iterative. I had to go back and forth many times through my data, my own analysis, and through the theoretical background from which I chose approach the data. My reasons for drawing on some concepts of discourse, particularly on a Foucauldian perspective of discourse, were manifold. Partly it was because most studies I came across in my literature review did mention language as an important aspect of e-learning practices. Some of these studies took a 'discourse', perspective on practices, and focused on discourse and language from either a student perspective, such as by looking at how learners interact online and construct their learning, or from an institutional and societal level of discourse. This inspired me to look at discourse and language as practices constructed by the course author and the tutor, and how these practices could impact on how the courses evolved.

Another aspect that led me to draw on a Foucauldian perspective was that it takes into account the role of discourse in shaping the practices at an ideological level. This perspective views language as the linguistic materiality of ideology, history and commonsense. In this sense, language carries meaning within a context, and the context, therefore, becomes an important part of understanding the way practices are shaped through language in action. This is why I thought the best way of carrying out this study was by using case studies, so I could look at particular instances of practice.

Collaborative learning also emerged as an important point, both from my literature review and also in my case studies. As a dominant discourse in e-learning, it seemed essential to understand its implications in the practices, and through this perspective I raised three themes that seemed to be constant in my data: the need for students'

participation in discussion forums, the role of assessment in shaping the practices and the role of the tutor in guiding the students. The latter involves not only conceptual guidance in terms of learning the course content, but also guidance through learning with new technologies and the Internet, and in meeting institutional requirements for the accreditation of knowledge.

By looking at all these aspects (language, discourse, collaborative learning, technology, practices, and tutors and course authors' roles) I came to understand that there were other discourses interplaying and underpinning the e-learning practices in my case studies, and that the collaborative learning discourse, although a significant one, was more overt than these other discourses that were embedded in the practices in a similar way. These other discourses such as the didactic and the institutional discourses, worked at a more implicit level. Nevertheless, the investigation of how these discourses appear in the practices was essential to lead me to an understanding of why applying academic theory (i.e. collaborative learning as a teaching and learning approach) into pedagogical practice seemed so complex. I attempted to demonstrate this complexity in my literature review, and as indicated by my case studies. The complexity seems to lie in the fact that there are these implicit discourses embedded in the practices, and without exploring their influence it is difficult to understand this 'gap' between what tutors try to achieve and what they actually achieve in terms of learner engagement in the construction of knowledge.

I am not suggesting that collaborative learning cannot be or is not successful in e-learning. Instead what I propose is that making collaborative learning a successful practice may not be as straightforward as the literature in the field seems to suggest. It all depends on how these various discourses interplay, and on how tutors and course authors let these discourses emerge in their practices. The point is, though, that

discourses operate at an ideological and commonsensical level, and therefore may not be immediately visible to the practitioner.

It is in this sense that I believe my proposed discursive perspective on e-learning practices is useful. It aids an understanding of the complexity of applying academic theory to pedagogical practice by providing an alternative way of thinking about e-learning practices – a way that takes into consideration discourses embedded in the practice but less visible to the practitioner. This discursive perspective does not aim to provide all the answers to the complexity of the practices in the field, but instead aims to serve as a tool to help the exploration of such complexities.

This research suggests that at the heart of teaching and learning practices in e-learning is the co-existence of different discourses in the practices, and that without those discourses the operationalisation of this mode of formal education would be challenged. Foucault (1972:49) argues that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" – in other words, it is through discourses that teaching and learning practices take form and shape. At the same time the discourses are shaped by these practices, so discourses co-exist.

Although discourses co-exist there are tensions between them. It is at the point of tension of these discourses that we can see where the practices are challenged. For example, the tension between the collaborative learning discourse, the institutional and the didactic discourse often appears in my data in the form of a struggle to make a learning task to be performed in a really collaborative way by the learners. This can be seen in the extract 6.28 for example, where the encouragement for collaborative learning to happen in the course was supported by the power perspective of the institutional discourse.

8.2 The limitations of the study

I have already mentioned some of the limitations of this research in previous chapters, particularly in chapter 4 when I discussed my research methodology and my choice for the case study method, but I believe it is important to mention them again in order to point to the need for further research.

This thesis is based on two case studies, and my claims are related to them. I am not claiming that this is a study from which generalizations can be constructed. Instead, in case studies and qualitative research, it is a combination of similar studies leading to similar conclusions that allows for a claim to be generalised.

One of the limitations of this study is that I cannot say that all teaching and learning practices will contain the same discourses as the ones identified here, and that they will operate in the same ways. Indeed, from the beginning of the study I attempted to make clear that this study would focus on just three out of many possible discourses interplaying in the practices. But qualitative studies nowadays do not always aim for claims from which generalizations can be drawn, and this is because of the dynamic nature of the social practices.

Another limitation is that I deliberately looked at the data in relation to the tasks and discourses and the ways in which these are operationalised by tutors, and not as much in relation to the learner. If I had done both, the study would have extended beyond its intended scope and could have become an impossible task. Although I did not focus on how the learners responded to the tasks, I did bring some of this perspective into my narrative. An analysis of the learners' perspectives would probably have led me to further investigation of the role that technology and digital literacy plays in e-learning. This is a limitation of the study, but at the same time a topic into which further research could take place.

Another aspect that needs to be discussed is the fact that this study is supported by a social perspective on discourse but itself offers an analysis scheme that is fragmented, divided into different categories (discourses and voices), in order to explain the practices. Throughout the study I have tried to emphasise that although I am looking into the data and trying to locate my discussion within a particular discourse (or sometimes voice), in actual fact all these things overlap – they are not separated. The limitation in terms of the analysis scheme is that it is very difficult to visually represent how these discourses overlap in the text. This is why I adopted a narrative mode for the data analysis, building this explanation with my own words during the process, as to how these discourses were operating. I recognise that this is a limitation of the analysis approach but at the same time it was the only way I found to examine the practices in depth and try to understand their totality, from a discursive perspective.

8.3 Further Research

Finally, I would like to propose possible areas of research within the field of educational technology that this discursive perspective on e-learning practices could be helpful.

I believe that a discursive perspective could be helpful to the understanding of the practices in different areas of e-learning, such as teaching with web 2.0 technologies and open educational resources (OER), for example. If a similar type of study was carried out in these fields, it would be possible to know whether the collaborative learning discourse would still be one of the dominant discourses, or whether the institutional discourse, for example, would be appearing in different ways. One of the possible aspects to investigate would be whether institutional discourses are changing with the evolving of technologies and the new ways of doing e-learning, such as by using social networking tools or user-generated content.

In the area of OER, for example, a discursive perspective could be applied in a number of ways. OER are types of educational material (e.g. text, audio and visual) that are offered free of charge, mostly online. They are either existing educational materials that are made available online to anyone who has Internet access; or they are content that has been purpose-built to suit the needs of a specific audience. In most cases, however, OER are types of educational material to be used to learn from, but not necessarily to gain accredited knowledge with; that is, many higher education institutions offer OER but not all of them design them in ways in which the informal learner could collect credits towards the accreditation of their studies.

A study drawing on a discursive perspective would be interested, for example, to understand what are the discourses most evident in OER provision that is not linked to accreditation. Are the institutional discourses changing in such cases? Would collaborative learning still be a significant discourse in those practices? Would the didactic discourse disappear when assessment and accreditation are not at stake, or would it still be commonsense? These are some of the possible questions that could be asked in the light of a discursive perspective, and that could potentially help to understand the evolution of current practices in e-learning.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 - Chapter 4

4.1 Research access request



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14th June 2004

Universidade de Santo Amaro – Campus IV
Diretor de Pós-Graduação
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Dear Professor Mendonça¹⁶,

I am Andreia Santos' doctoral supervisor and am writing to you to support her informal request to carry out her fieldwork at the University of Santo Amaro. I understand from Andreia that UNISA has a pioneering e-learning department in São Paulo - UNISA DIGITAL, which has been providing undergraduate students with the chance to study certain academic subjects online. This online academic environment would be ideal for Andreia to conduct her research, and I would be very grateful to you if you could consider providing research access to Andreia. Later in her research, Andreia will compare the data she has collected in Brazil with universities elsewhere, either in the UK or in the United States of America. I am sure that you will benefit from the application of her research findings in your department.

Andreia has two supervisors, myself and Dr Denise Whitelock. You can find out more about our work and the Institute of Educational Technology, where Andreia is registered as a doctoral student, at <http://iet.open.ac.uk/research/>. If Andreia is granted permission to conduct her fieldwork with you she will continue to receive supervisory

¹⁶ Fictitious name

support from us through e mail and telephone contact. Depending upon the availability of funds, it might also be possible for one of her supervisors to visit UNISA to see the fieldwork that she is carrying out and the way in which her critical andragogical approach is being implemented. This would also provide an opportunity for us to talk about joint research interests.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if there are any further questions that you have with regard to Andreia conducting her research at UNISA.

Yours sincerely

Mary R.Lea
Senior Lecturer in Teaching and Learning

4.2 Example of initial data analysis process

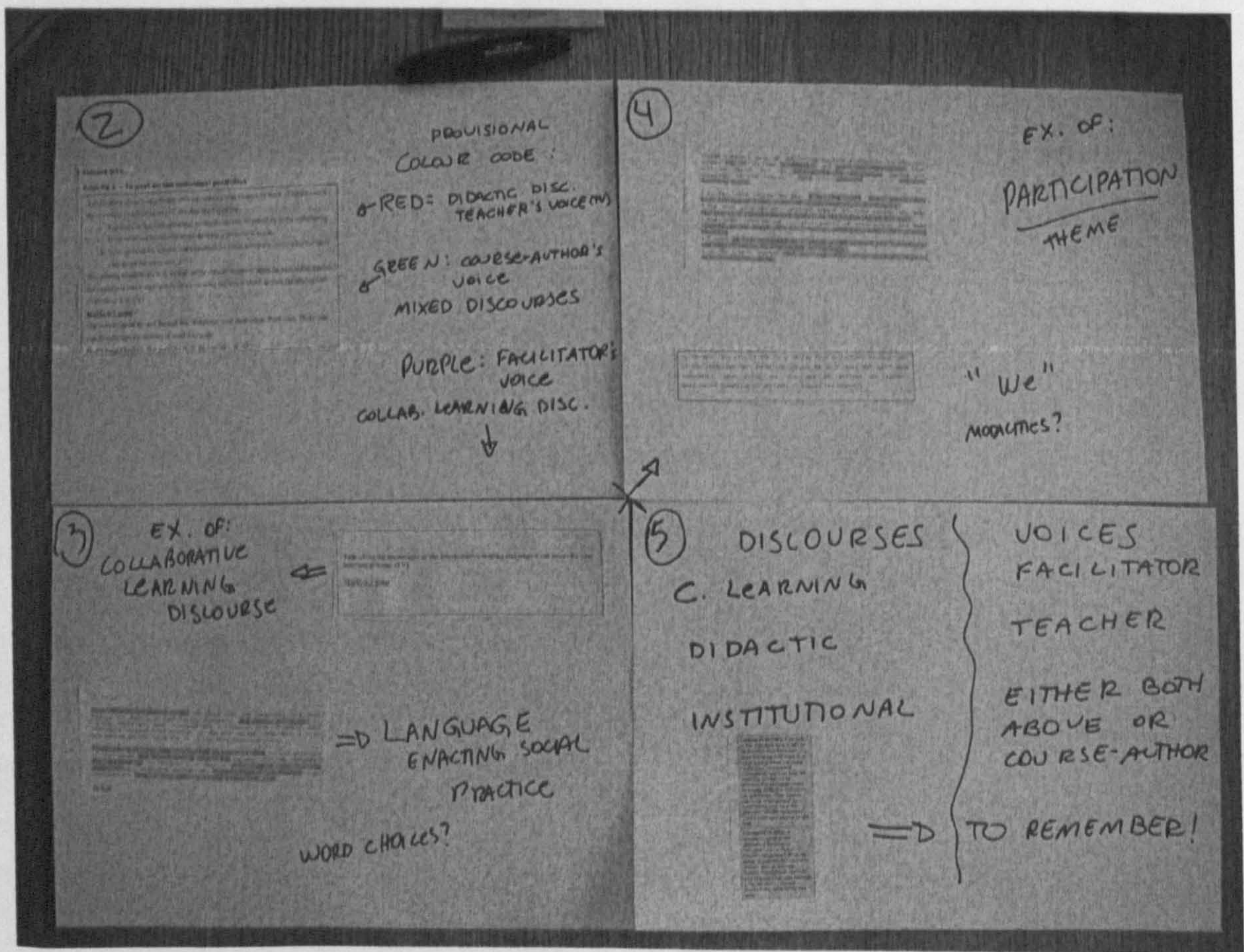


Figure A1.1 - Exploring discourses in the data

Appendix 2 - Chapter 5

5.1 Institutional document

From section 10.8.4 of the institutional document

Teacher Training

Unis@Digital offers its authors and tutors full support in writing content and guiding students, through its multidisciplinary team. In addition to systematic support during the writing and tutoring processes, it trains the teachers through a course prepared by teachers specialising in their respective teaching areas: education, psychology, communication and technology.

The course entitled Preparing Authors/Tutors for the Web Environment aims to provide education professionals with the skills and experience they need to meet the challenge of working with the web. Since communication over a telematic network currently requires the professional to be familiar with Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the course aims to provide the educational, cognitive and behavioural, communicative and technological assistance necessary for the preparation of a distance learning educational programme.

5.2 Institutional document

From section 3 of the institutional document

Teaching Material

In distance education the teaching material is vitally important. In this method of teaching, each student must be seen as a person capable of independent learning using the various materials and the guidance of a teacher-facilitator, as well as through opportunities for interaction with other participants.

The quality of these materials and of the educational guidance must be such that they are able to supplement, as a minimum, some of the functions of a teacher in a lecture theatre, i.e. informing, motivating, supervising and assessing, in addition to encouraging the development of interdisciplinary knowledge, students' creativity through exercises, supplementary texts, proposals and projects, among other didactic and methodological resources.

5.3 Institutional document

From section 3 of the institutional document

Competences: [...]

Teacher-facilitator (5.1.2)

- To supervise the student, posing challenging questions and offering stimulating activities
- To understand the language used in the various distance learning media, for the best guidance and supervision of the course
- To analyse the theoretical and methodological, technical, ethical and political aspects underlying teacher-facilitators' actions on the course, basing them on and bringing them into line with the policies and directives of the institution's distance education proposal, with the course objectives and with the proposed target audience
- To update systematically and automatically the activities offered to the students
- To maintain a bidirectional relationship with the students, bearing in mind the complexity and specificity of this relationship
- To facilitate and propose situations that encourage debate, suggestions, opinions, sharing and exchanging experiences, information and knowledge
- To stimulate the student to take a position on the questions and situations proposed
- To promote student training from a generalist and historical perspective, set within a cultural context
- Assessing the acquisition, construction and re-construction of information and knowledge by the student, and their participation and investment in the course
- To act responsibly, critically and in a committed manner in this new way of teaching, bearing in mind the complexity and specificity of a technological society
- To plan and propose the educational structure of the course, together with the teams at Unis@Digital
- To reduce the impact of physical, geographical and temporal distances, promoting media-student, student-course, student-tutor, student-other students, and student-real-life experience interaction

5.4 Institutional document

[...] we understand distance education as a process of teaching and learning in which it is possible to involve various multimedia resources to achieve a large number of students. It enables the (re)construction of knowledge, abilities and attitudes by means of synchronous and asynchronous contact mediated by the tutor and the multi and interdisciplinary team. The various materials and methodologies systematically organized and in association with one another can guarantee the dynamism and interactivity between the subjects involved in the process of teaching and learning".

5.5 Institutional document

From section 10.10 of the institutional document

Interaction in the distance education process

The advent of education delivered using new technologies has led educators to reflect on the importance of interaction in the teaching-learning process. Starting from the premise that learning is fundamentally a social experience of interaction through language and action (Vygotsky, 1984)⁸, there is a need to analyse the models, channels and methods used to facilitate the interactive process.

Interaction is a human phenomenon that is psychologically, socially, linguistically, semiotically and anthropologically complex. Particularly in the context of distance education, interacting can become a challenge because communication will be delivered through technological instruments whereby people cannot experience verbal communication. Interaction occurs between people with different lifestyles, ideas, beliefs, socio-economic levels, abilities, knowledge, preconceptions, limitations etc. It is therefore important to plan and execute strategies that provide interactivity on such courses.

Initially, distance learning courses can be said to have three types of interaction: student-student, student-teacher and student-content (Moore, 1989)³. However, we also need to consider that interactivity also occurs between the student and the technological platform, the student and the institution, and between other elements that make up the student's world, such as their life history, family, social class and other groups they belong to. When partnered with technological resources, interactivity becomes a defining factor in distance education, since it fundamentally determines how means of communication are used, the new relationships between those involved in the learning process that are established in language and in the production of study material (Fiorentini & Moraes, 2000)¹⁰.

¹⁰ VYGOTSKY, L.S. The social training of the mind (A formação social da mente). São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1984

Moore, M. G. (1989). Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*. 3 (2) 1-6.

FIorentini, L. E. MORAIS, R., Language and interactivity in distance education (Linguagens e interatividade na educação a distância). São Paulo: P&D, 2000 (5.1.4)

5.6 Institutional document

Continued from section above

We are therefore drafting new courses, on the premise that "interactions (between students) encourage development, promote change and transform people" (Coll & Marti, 1999).

Starting from the above premise, Unis@Digital courses are structured on the basis of two theories: the constructivist theories of Piaget, and the social interactionist theories of Vygotsky.

Founded on constructivist and social interactionist concepts, our courses seek to use methodologies that can promote collaborative work between participants in order to encourage and promote the construction of knowledge. Interactivity between students and between students and tutors will therefore take place through synchronous and asynchronous tools:

Asynchronous

- Group activities carried out in the forum or group portfolio: learning through problem-solving, debates, case studies, comparative tables, structured arguments, brainstorming etc.
- Correspondence: communication through the TelEduc environment internal email system
- Discussion forum: debates on issues suggested by the teacher-facilitator.

Synchronous:

- Chat: Real-time communication enabling discussion of doubts, interacting with the group and giving continuity to the debates.
- Telephone: communication at pre-determined intervals agreed between the teacher-facilitator and students to resolve queries about the content or any aspect of the course.
- Classroom session: supplementary lectures, guidance and discussion of educational practices and experiences
- Test: classroom assessment of the courses

5.7 Institutional document

The preparation of materials by the Unis@Digital team is underpinned by the excellent quality of the various media used. This production includes educational and didactic materials listed as follows:

Educational

Printed educational material for students

- Student guide – fixed items:
 1. Introduction to the University
 2. Introduction to Unis@Digital
 3. Purpose of the guide
 4. Teacher-facilitator's duties
 5. Students' rights and duties
 6. The importance of the classroom sessions
 7. Introduction to the assessment system

8. How to ask for help when you have queries
9. Tips for self-study
10. Opening hours of the support offices
11. Payment and finance
12. The curricular framework of the course
13. Rules of the course
14. Educational structure
15. Annexes: Sheet for teacher-facilitator & student dialogue; assessment of the student guide

Digital educational material for students and teachers

- Student guide (will contain the same content described above)
 - Guide to each course
1. General introduction
 2. General Objective
 3. Structure
 - 3.1 Introduction to the study blocks
 - 3.2 Introduction to higher education universities
 4. Assessment system
 5. Calendar of course activities

5.8 Language of the task

Interactivity is a communication relationship between individuals, groups and technologies. When you take a course online, you experience four types of interactivity: student/platform, student-student, student-teacher and student-content. Now let's focus on how student-student interactivity works.

Use all the possible ways to interact and communicate with the other participants. Even better, invite two or three peer students to form a support group and to work together. You must be asking yourself: How does this work? Does it mean I can do all the activities in groups? No. In fact when you are part of a support group it does not mean that you will do all the activities (even the individual ones) in a group. What we want is that you make friends with the other course participants (in the same way that you have friends in a face-to-face classroom). The colleagues you invite to participate in your support group will help you during your learning process. In this sense, whenever you have questions about an aspect of the course you will be able to call or to send an email to your friends and vice-versa. You and your friends will be able to study together and discuss the themes of the course; and this will certainly help you to keep yourself motivated and to learn more.

Unis@Digital (tips for success)

5.9 In chapter 5, page 164.

5.10 Email from tutor to learners

Dear students,

I write to remind you that the Research Methods course offered by Unis@Digital has already officially started. For those of you who have not yet accessed the course, please do so as soon as possible. In order to access the course, follow these steps:

Go to Unisa's page www.unisa.br

On the upper bar click on 'Unis@Digital'

On the left side of the screen, click on 'Online disciplines'

Click on the access to the 'semester mode'

Click on 'Metodologia Científica'

Insert your usernames and passwords

Reminders:

We will have a face-to-face meeting on campus III on the 25th of September (Saturday) from 19:00-21:00 h. Put it in the diary; I look forward to seeing you there.

The deadline for delivering the activities in block one has been postponed; it is now the 26th of September 2004.

If you have any problems related to accessing the online course, please send an email to unisadigital@unisa.br or call 5545-8600

I am counting on your participation in the course!

Best wishes,

Teacher Andreia

5.11 Email from learner

Title: Course activities

Good afternoon,

Teacher, has the period to deliver the activities finished?

I am sorry if I am a bit lost, but it is because I think it is too many things for an 'online course'; it is chat, activities, group activities, discussion forums, and it goes without saying that we had two face-to-face exams. Teachers, I am sorry if I am mistaken, but I do not particularly have a reserved time to do so many things! The chat is pre-defined at a time that I cannot access it; when I think about start doing the activities it is so much that only one question had to be approximately 3 pages, I think it was question 4; we need to have a lot of

time to do it all.

Teacher, I can foresee that I will have to do an exam resit, but the way things are going it is hard, I know that maybe you are not to blame for the general planning of the discipline. But the face-to-face discipline does not ask the students 1/10 of everything you asked in the online course.

I think you all made a false publicitary campaign of the course, you said we had to reserve a 'little time' to do the course online and not 'a lot of time'; it is not that I am lazy, but I also have to look after the other disciplines I am studying, and of my job.

I would like you teacher to get in touch with me, because I am unhappy with this online course, and I only ended up disfavouing myself by choosing it as a way of learning the Research Methods discipline.

Yours faithfully,

Student A

5.12 Email from tutor to learner

Dear Student A,

I would like to start by saying that I have forwarded your comments to the course coordinator, who is responsible for the production of the course. However, I would like to remind you of the following:

- An online course is not necessarily different from a face-to-face course in terms of content, but it is indeed a more flexible type of course because the learner can access the course website according to their own timetable;
- It is important that the learner accesses the course website frequently, because there the dates of the exams, the assignment deadlines etc are made available in advance;
- You accessed the course website only 23 times until the present moment. This is a very low number of accesses in order to be able to follow the course appropriately;
- Participation in the chat is not compulsory. Those students who take part on it have an incentive in their marks. However, this incentive is not to the disadvantage of the students who do not take part in the chat, because there are many other additional activities that can be done to enhance the final mark;
- In a face-to-face course the attendance is compulsory. You would have to attend the Research Methods course on a weekly basis, for at least 2 hours a week. If you had had the same type of commitment with the online course your progress could have been much better.

Kind regards,

Teacher Andreia

5.13 Email from course coordinator to learner

Dear Student A,

I received your observations and I want to complement the comments of the teacher Andreia.

We are offering an online course with the same content that is available in the face-to-face course. As well as the face-to-face courses have a class plan to follow – tasks, group assignments, exams etc – so does the online course. We try to publicise what the learners are expected to do early in our online calendar, with a more flexible period, so the learner can find the time to organise themselves and to participate of what has been proposed.

We believe that the online course can facilitate the life of the learner (time and space – according to each one's responsibilities), although it does not mean to present the content superficially. The course offers activities, assignments, opportunities for research, and exchanges between the tutor and the students. These are aimed at offering more opportunities for the learners to increase their chance to get a good mark, besides also taking you to a better understanding of the course content.

Our aim is that the students learn and that the knowledge is really understood. We regret that the face-to-face courses are not offering as many activities and assignments as the online course, and as I said, we believe that the bigger the engagement of the learner with the tasks and exchanges, the better his/her learning.

This is our final aim and I hope you understand that we will not give it up. We and everybody else have also to meet deadlines.

Yours faithfully,

Prof. Maria Delanhos

5.14 Email from the tutor to learners

Title: First chat follow-up

Hi everyone. After our first chat session, which by the way was a success, we will discuss the main issues raised during the chat in the discussion forum.

Do participate!

Regards,

Teacher Andreia

5.15 Language of the task

Block 1, task 1

Select a text, chapter or book of which you feel the necessity to reflect upon, and do the following:

- A. Read it, and underline the parts you consider important;
- B. From what you have underlined, develop a personal schema;

C. Now, re-read the schema and construct a critical summary, containing the ideas considered the main ones;

Both the schema and the critical summary must be sent to the teacher – facilitator, and also a short comment on what the text is about so that the teacher can understand it.

Mark: 0-1 point

The activity must be sent through the Portfolio tool (Individual Portfolio). There you can directly type the activity or send it as file.

Do not forget to share this portfolio with the teachers.

5.16 Email: Title: crucial queries

From: Student B

Good afternoon, I am starting today at Unis@Digital and I expect to have a big goal in this discipline. As I am accessing the course for the first time, I am very confused in relation to the ETN's and I do not understand the process for sending the course activities and tasks.

I WAIT FOR YOUR ANSWER THE QUICKEST AS POSSIBLE!

Student B

5.17 Email: Title: Online course on Research Methods

From: Student C

Andreia, could you please clarify what you want for the task of the ETN1, and also whether it is individual or in groups?

Thanks, Student C

5.18 Email: Title: Query

From: Student D

Dear teacher Andreia,

I am not sure of what it is to be done in relation to Activity 1.

What do we need to do, the summary of a text followed by a 'critique' of the reading? Or should I follow a particular schema that I don't know about?

I saw in the course that there are some rules, as to read, understand, underline and so far I understood them, but what I am not understanding is what I really need to do, if it is only a summary or if it is a summary with a critique in the end so you will know what I based my summary on... so, I will be grateful if you could clarify my query...

Best wishes,

Student D

5.19 Language of the task

Block 2 (Unis@Digital original)

In this block, we studied the universe of the research studies, and we learned that the careful elaboration of the research project is essential for the achievement of the desired goals. This way, please answer:

- A) What is a research project;
- B) What is understood by the theme of a research project and how should it be delimited?
- C) What are the aims of the research questions/hypotheses and how should they be formulated?
- D) What is the importance of the theoretical background?

Mark: 0-1 point

5.20 Language of the task

Block 2 (optional, my design)

¹⁷ The students received two scenarios and had the following questions:

- a) What is the best technique of investigation to be used (qualitative, quantitative or both? Why?);
- b) What are the best instruments for data collection in each situation? Itemise and explain them.
- c) What is the subject/theme of each research project?
- d) What hypothesis or research questions would you create for each one of these situations?

5.21 Discussion forum question 1

Block 2 (chat follow-up)

Qualitative and quantitative research methods focus on different research objectives. What are they? How do we make the option for either methods and how do we know whether we might need both?

¹⁷ This is my personal note, not written in the task.

5.22 Discussion forum question 2

Block 2

The concept of 'truth' is always questionable; it is like discussing what 'reality' is. The positivists tend to claim that something is true because it is scientifically proved – but what does that mean? It can be considered truth up to a certain moment in history, but following research might come up and move forward that field of knowledge, by verifying that there might be other views of the same subject. How do you understand the question of the truth in science?

5.23 Discussion forum question

Block 1

Block 1, task 3

To post in the individual portfolios

According to Paes de Barros & Lehfel (1986) what is the importance of the scientific methodologies in the development of studies and research?

Mark – 0-0.5 points

The activity must be sent through the portfolio tool (individual portfolio).

There you can type the activity directly or send it as a file.

Do not forget to share this portfolio with the teachers.

5.24 Extract from interview with Sara (educational psychologist)

“The tutor needs to be flexible and not think of themselves as the ones who know everything. The tutor accepts the point of view of the students; after all although the knowledge of the student is not as big as the one of the tutor it is still valid, and this motivates the student to participate. [...] The role of the tutor is to be a mediator, and they have to accept the participation of the student and encourage them; and all of this with very few criticisms because if the student feels they are being criticised right at the beginning they get repressed. The tutor is a mediator and a motivator.”

(Sara, Educational Psychologist at Unis@Digital)

5.25 Extract from interview with Maria, pedagogic coordinator

“The teacher follows the student step-by-step, by means of the activities, of what they propose to the student and the support they offer. The teacher tries to make the student participate more actively [...]. The role of the teacher-facilitator is to always be stirring up the student's participation.”

(Maria Delanhos, pedagogic coordinator)

5.26 The Institutional Document (full version)

The Institutional Project - Unis@Digital

1.0 Unis@Digital duties:

- Aiding the production of knowledge and of new teaching methodologies. Technological Coordination
- Adapting texts for the web guided by the authors
- Preparing the layout of webpages, monitoring the sites, updating them daily
- Reviewing the design of all material that is sent out to the student
- Diagramming texts (including figures, charts, diagrams etc.) for printed material
- Customising the e-learning platform, maintaining the platform, answering calls from students with queries about how to use the platform
- Supporting the teacher-facilitators in technological questions
- Answering telephone calls and emails from the different university centres
- Forwarding technical problems to the relevant person
- Preparing educational software using CD-ROMs, as part of a team with other professionals in this sector
- Providing technical support to the students. Administrative Coordination
- Recommending educational programmes, systems and materials relating to Distance Learning for purchase, according to area of competence
- Selecting, producing, organising and distributing media and materials to students on the distance learning courses
- Indicating the appropriate media for transmitting and delivering the courses
- Aiding and supporting the teaching and technology coordination team in the design and delivery of programmes and projects
- Preparing and issuing course enrolment forms, and receiving and processing the enrolments
- Keeping the register of students enrolled on the distance learning courses well organised
- Arranging for the issue of certificates, statements, reports etc.
- Organising documents, files and other materials pertaining to the courses
- Forwarding students' criticisms, questions, problems, queries and opinions to the Unis@Digital central office
- Being responsible for the production, receipt, safekeeping and dissemination of the course material
- Assisting the administration department, giving an opinion on the feasibility of the courses according to area of competence
- Keeping all student, course and Unis@Digital correspondence up to date

- Working with the Unis@Digital central office for the smooth running of the activities offered
- Joining the Unis@Digital Distance Education Council, being responsible for the activities corresponding to area of competence

1. Teacher-facilitator

- Supervising the student, posing challenging questions and offering stimulating activities
- Understanding the language used in the various distance learning media, for the best guidance and supervision of the course
- Analysing the theoretical and methodological, technical, ethical and political aspects underlying teacher-facilitators' actions on the course, basing them on and bringing them into line with the policies and directives of the institution's distance education proposal, with the course objectives and with the proposed target audience
- Systematically and automatically updating the activities offered to the students
- Maintaining a bidirectional relationship with the students, bearing in mind the complexity and specificity of this relationship
- Facilitating and proposing situations that encourage debate, suggestions, opinions, sharing and exchanging experiences, information and knowledge
- Stimulating the student to take a position on the questions and situations proposed
- Promoting student training from a generalist and historical perspective, set within a cultural context
- Assessing the acquisition, construction and re-construction of information and knowledge by the student, and their participation and investment in the course
- Acting responsibly, critically and in a committed manner in this new way of teaching, bearing in mind the complexity and specificity of a technological society
- Planning and proposing the educational structure of the course, together with the teams at Unis@Digital
- Reducing the impact of physical, geographical and temporal distances, promoting media-student, student-course, student-tutor, student-other students, and student-real-life experience interaction
- Assisting and participating in the classroom sessions programme
- Interacting with other teachers/tutors and with the Unis@Digital team
- Participating in the process of designing, producing and implementing the course teaching material
- Establishing student performance assessment, taking into account the criteria proposed on the course
- Suggesting sources of research, materials and media needed for in-depth study to the student
- Stimulating the students, encouraging them to develop their learning

2. Teacher Training

Unis@Digital offers its authors and tutors full support in writing content and guiding students, through its multidisciplinary team. In addition to systematic support during the writing and tutoring processes, it trains the teachers through a course prepared by teachers specialising in their respective teaching areas: education, psychology, communication and technology.

The course entitled Preparing Authors/Tutors for the Web Environment aims to provide education professionals with the skills and experience they need to meet the challenge of working with the web. Since communication over a telematic network currently requires the professional to be familiar with Information and Communication Technology (ITC), the course aims to provide the educational, cognitive and behavioural, communicative and technological assistance necessary for the preparation of a distance learning educational programme.

3. Teaching Material

In distance education the teaching material is vitally important. In this method of teaching, each student must be seen as a person capable of independent learning using the various materials and the guidance of a teacher-facilitator, as well as through opportunities for interaction with other participants.

The quality of these materials and of the educational guidance must be such that they are able to supplement, as a minimum, some of the functions of a teacher in a lecture theatre, i.e. informing, motivating, supervising and assessing, in addition to encouraging the development of interdisciplinary knowledge, students' creativity through exercises, supplementary texts, proposals and projects, among other didactic and methodological resources.

On the basis of these concepts, the teaching material to be used in distance education must be made available through multiple resources such as print and digital media – CD-ROM, internet, video, printed material, satellite, among others, to allow the students to prepare reasoned arguments, to 'absorb' and learn the knowledge presented.

When producing teaching material in distance education, it is important to have the participation of the multidisciplinary team (teachers, educationalists, psychologists, proofreaders, indexers, internet specialists), who must design, plan and produce it.

Ruiz e Cordero¹⁸ (1997) referred to the key aspects that must be considered when drafting teaching material for distance education, principally regarding the definitions of the means of communication and narrative strategies to be applied to the texts, such as audiovisual language and the auxiliary tools used for the teaching-learning process.

Another aspect to be considered is the importance of context in writing distance education teaching material. It is fundamental that, when writing the teaching materials, distance

¹⁸ RUIZ, T. B. e CORDERO, J. M. Guide to designing, preparing and assessing written material (*Guía para el diseño, elaboración y evaluación de material escrito*), Brasília/ Madrid. UnB/ Uned, 1997. Postscript for the Specialist Course in Continuing and Distance Education at the Faculty of Education at the University of Brasilia, 1997/1998.

education teachers structure their discourse taking into account the interests and expectations of their students (Fiorentini, 2000)¹⁹.

The preparation of materials by the Unis@Digital team is underpinned by the excellent quality of the various media used. This production includes educational and didactic materials listed as follows:

Educational

Printed educational material for students

- Student guide – fixed items:

1. Introduction to the University
2. Introduction to Unis@Digital
3. Purpose of the guide
4. Teacher-facilitator's duties
5. Students' rights and duties
6. The importance of the classroom sessions
7. Introduction to the assessment system
8. How to ask for help when you have queries
9. Tips for self-study
10. Opening hours of the support offices
11. Payment and finance
12. The curricular framework of the course
13. Rules of the course
14. Educational structure
15. Annexes: Sheet for teacher-facilitator & student dialogue; assessment of the student guide

Digital educational material for students and teachers

- Student guide (will contain the same content described above)
- Guide to each course

1. General introduction
2. General Objective
3. Structure
 - 3.1. Introduction to ETNs
 - 3.2. Introduction to higher education universities
4. Assessment system
5. Calendar of course activities

Printed educational material for teachers

- Unis@Digital recommendations for the teacher-facilitator – fixed items

1. Introduction to distance education
2. Pedagogical Aspect

¹⁹ FIORENTINI, L. E MORAIS, R., Language and interactivity in distance education (*Linguagens e interatividade na educação a distância*). São Paulo: P&D, 2000

- a) Functioning of the subject/course
- b) Supervising students online and in person
- c) Marking and assessing written exercises
- d) The teacher-student relationship
- e) Activity proposals in distance education methodology (individual and in groups)

3. Technological Aspect

- a) How the TelEduc platform works
- b) Technical Support

4. Motivation

- a) Motivating student participation
- b) Feedback tips

5. Administration

- a) Test template documentation at Unis@Digital
- b) Scheduling dates for chats, classroom sessions and tests
- c) Completing diaries, records and grade entries
- d) Calendar and use of tests

▪ Teacher/writer guide – fixed items

1. Introduction to distance education
2. Structure for writing the content
3. Characteristics of hypertext writing (language and interactivity)
4. Use of coloured captions for writing content
5. Sample format and style
6. Content delivery

Didactic

Printed didactic material for students and teachers

- Activity book – self-study exercises, case studies, self tests etc., supplementary tests and suggested bibliographies

Digital didactic material for students and teachers

- Virtual national libraries of public and private institutions
- CD-ROM

 1. Videos
 2. Interviews
 3. Self tests
 4. Slideshow
 5. Music and images
 6. Study guides
 7. Supplementary texts
 8. Games and simulations
 9. Course content

- Subject content – available online
- TelEduc environment – shared access area for students, teachers and the multidisciplinary team

4. Preparing materials

The stages of producing the teaching material shall be in the following order: outlining the course content, selection and guidance for authorship, educational design, spell checking, guide, production, overall review of the materials.

10. Outlining the course content – the academic and educational coordination team and course coordination team determine which courses must be produced on the basis of the syllabus.
11. Selection and guidance for authorship – teachers of the subjects chosen will be called for selection and subsequent guidance for writing the course content. The content will be developed by those holding doctorates, masters degrees, or by specialists in the specific areas. They will assign authorship rights for the content to Unisa, which pays for this service. The writers will follow the subject syllabi, under the guidance of the multidisciplinary team.
12. Educational design – refers to the division of the content into activities and designating which material will be produced, adapting the content to the semi-classroom method. The educational designer supervises the writer, outlining what content must be made available on the internet, on CD-ROM or in print, which must be available remotely, and which must be agreed in person. He outlines the illustrations, charts, tables and interactive features that must be used in the content in order for it to be most appropriate to the educational purpose. At this stage, individual and group assessment activities either classroom or by distance education, are also outlined. At the end of this stage, the subject's prototype is complete, along with a plan with all the activities and respective hourly loads, and the educational software tools and materials to be produced.
13. Spell check – after it has been written, the content is submitted for spell checking and correction by specialist professionals. After the spell check, the necessary amendments will be made to the material.
14. Material production guide – the educational designer writes a guide to the tasks for producing video, CD-ROM, print material, games programming, simulations and websites and sends the tasks to the production team.
15. Material production – the team produces material under the guidance of the educational designer and with the supervision of the writer. The production relates to:
 - a) adapting content for hypertext
 - b) adding presentations in PowerPoint, Excel, texts in Word etc., delivered by the writers
 - c) text illustrations for print and digital material
 - d) adapting the printed educational material to the web environment
 - e) recording videos to be made available on CD-ROM
 - f) recording CD-ROMs

- g) programming games and simulations as teaching resources
 - h) preparing layout and editing of written material to be sent to the graphic designer.
- Overall review of the materials – to be done by the academic and educational coordination team, course coordinator and multidisciplinary team. After the review, the necessary amendments will be made to the material.

5. A availability of the materials

The printed educational and study materials, supplementary media and CD-ROMs will be sent by post or delivered at classroom sessions for students resident in São Paulo and for other States through the regional centres.

The administrative coordination team will use a distribution flowchart for equipping the students with the respective materials within the deadlines stipulated.

The content of the course and the digital study material will be available on the TelEduc platform, and can be printed and accessed by the students from any computer with internet access.

6. Interaction in the distance education process

The advent of education delivered using new technologies has led educators to reflect on the importance of interaction in the teaching-learning process. Starting from the premise that learning is fundamentally a social experience of interaction through language and action (Vygotsky, 1984)⁸, there is a need to analyse the models, channels and methods used to facilitate the interactive process.

Interaction is a human phenomenon that is psychologically, socially, linguistically, semiotically and anthropologically complex. Particularly in the context of distance education, interacting can become a challenge because communication will be delivered through technological instruments whereby people cannot experience verbal communication. Interaction occurs between people with different lifestyles, ideas, beliefs, socio-economic levels, abilities, knowledge, preconceptions, limitations etc. It is therefore important to plan and execute strategies that provide interactivity on such courses.

Initially, distance learning courses can be said to have three types of interaction: student-student, student-teacher and student-content (Moore, 1989)³. However, we also need to consider that interactivity also occurs between the student and the technological platform, the student and the institution, and between other elements that make up the student's world, such as their life history, family, social class and other groups they belong to. When partnered with technological resources, interactivity becomes a defining factor in distance education, since it fundamentally determines how means of communication are used, the new relationships between those involved in the learning process that are established in language and in the production of study material (Fiorentini & Moraes, 2000)¹⁰.

¹⁰ VYGOTSKY, L.S. *The social training of the mind (A formação social da mente)*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1984

Moore, M. G. (1989). Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 3 (2) 1-6.

FIORENTINI, L. E. MORAIS, R., *Language and interactivity in distance education (Linguagens e interatividade na educação a distância)*. São Paulo: P&D, 2000

7. Student-student and student-tutor interaction

Interaction between students is highly important in distance learning courses, to facilitate promotion of learning, enabling there to be a continual exchange of knowledge – encouraging the students to (re)construct knowledge.

We are therefore drafting new courses, on the premise that “interactions (between students) encourage development, promote change and transform people” (Coll & Marti, 1999)¹¹.

Starting from the above premise, Unis@Digital courses are structured on the basis of two theories: the constructivist theories of Piaget, and the social interactionist theories of Vygotsky.

Founded on constructivist and social interactionist concepts, our courses seek to use methodologies that can promote collaborative work between participants in order to encourage and promote the construction of knowledge. Interactivity between students and between students and tutors will therefore take place through synchronous and asynchronous tools:

Asynchronous:

- Group activities carried out in the forum or group portfolio: learning through problem-solving, debates, case studies, comparative tables, structured arguments, brainstorming etc.
- Correspondence: communication through the TelEduc environment internal email system
- Discussion forum: debates on issues suggested by the teacher-facilitator.

Synchronous:

- Chat: Real-time communication enabling discussion of doubts, interacting with the group and giving continuity to the debates.
- Telephone: communication at pre-determined intervals agreed between the teacher-facilitator and students to resolve queries about the content or any aspect of the course.
- Classroom session: supplementary lectures, guidance and discussion of educational practices and experiences
- Test: classroom assessment of the courses

Schedule of teacher-facilitator time allocated to each group of 50 students, in courses with 50hrs/student

Synchronous	Work hours per semester
Chat	1 chat of 50 minutes – 1 per subject, for a group of approx. 15 students in each chat. Total - 9hrs/student per semester
Telephone	15 hours of teaching time allocated at pre-set timetables
Classroom session and test	20 hours, depending on the semester
Asynchronous	
Individual activities	60 hours
Group work	30 hours
Correspondence	15 hours
Forum	20 hours
Total hours per semester	174 hours; 8 hrs/student each week

¹¹ Coll, C., and Marti, E. (1999). Learning and development: the genetic and cognitive design of learning (Aprendizaje y desarrollo: la concepción genético – cognitiva del aprendizaje). In Palacios.

Marchesi, A. and Coll, C. (Comps), Psychological Development and Education (Desarrollo Psicológico y Educación), Vol II (Chap. 7, pp. 121-139). Madrid: Alianza

- The teacher-facilitator will be available to clarify any queries and offer explanations and guidance in real time, in a chatroom or group of students linked to the virtual forum
- The timetable is flexible and can be agreed between the group of students and the teacher
- The teacher-facilitator has different groups each week, so that all students are catered for
- The structure of the Courses and Programmes enables thematic issues for debate to be introduced each week by the teacher-facilitator, linked to the study units and to the guiding thematic axes for all groups:
- The teacher-facilitator must always encourage bidirectional communication.

8. Student/multidisciplinary team interaction

Students' queries, questions, opinions, suggestions will be answered promptly, rapidly and qualitatively by the various members of the Unis@Digital teams. For this purpose they will have access to the following contacts:

- course email address
- the email addresses of the Unis@Digital coordinators

- the email addresses of the course teachers/tutors
- the email addresses of the multidisciplinary team
- the email addresses of the technical and administrative support team
- the telephone numbers of Unis@Digital and their respective contact details
- fax number
- the address of Unis@Digital for visits and on-site consultation
- The student may communicate not only with the teacher-facilitator but also with any member of the Unis@Digital team by post, fax, email or telephone
- The student has continual access to technical support.

9. Student/institution interaction

Contact Centre

The Contact Centre at UNISA, created in 1999 (Campus I — II and III), under the Academic Dean, aims to provide assistance to the student and to the outside community, as requested by the University, offering information on the educational departments as well as other services which UNISA provides to the community.

The activities of the Contact Centre include:

Receiving, recording and handling academic and financial files, FIES – Student Funding, Scholarships, Traineeships,

Documents corresponding to these,

reports, statements, various applications etc.

This also includes information, files, applications, statements, general requests for documents relating to online courses, processing for UNISA Digital, allocated to the system, directories or DIRAC (Directory of Academic Records) and returning these to the student.

10. Assessment of the educational process – assessment design

We know that assessment is something extremely complex and difficult to do, since it does not always reflect faithfully what we want it to, on the one hand, and what we know, on the other. We shall therefore tackle a number of concepts that are distinct from assessment and learning verification, in order to have more elements and criteria to use in this task with the students.

Assessment can be understood as procedural and diagnostic.

Procedural is assessment that is built up during the whole teaching-learning process. It is the continual offering of assessment criteria and models which in some way monitor students' development.

This verification and monitoring can be done through observing participation, interest and resolution of the activities and tasks, as part of other assessment methods. Procedural and diagnostic assessment occurs when:

The students are supervised *pari passu* in activities and tasks, in order to verify their abilities and difficulties in the learning process.

The procedural and diagnostic assessment method takes into account the various procedures and criteria used in the virtual classrooms and the students' different stages of learning, diagnostically.

Self-assessment aims to awaken awareness in the student of the course's key points or of student behaviour that needs to be improved. For this, institutions that use the internet can offer an exercise on content at the end of each module, without counting the points for overall assessment. Institutions that do not use this tool can incorporate the self-assessment into the printed material mixed in with objective and subjective questions on content. Both means of assessment can use questions that encourage the student to reflect on their behaviour towards the group and their participation in activities.

Assessment Guidelines

We must think of assessment in terms of whether it diagnoses students' learning and contributes to the process of constructing and (re)constructing knowledge.

For this to occur, we can:

- Substitute traditional correction practices (assumed to be wise but incorrect) with the investigation and interpretation of the different responses presented by the students in the written activities.
- Address the gaps in the construction of students' knowledge, evidenced in the different learning situations or through formal assessment procedures, seeking to reconstruct the misunderstood concept, so as to overcome students' difficulties.
- Supervising the knowledge construction process, with the emphasis on understanding and not simply on memorising.
- Encouraging the student with various activities, so that the bimonthly mark or assessment is not exclusively the result of the institutional test.

5.27-5.30 Unis@Digital Interviews: transcriptions translated into English

5.27 Interview with Ms Maria Delanhos (pedagogic coordinator)

Interviewer (Andreia)

Respondent (Maria)

Andreia: Good afternoon, Maria

Maria: Good afternoon!

Andreia: This is tutor Maria Delanhos, pedagogical coordinator from Unis@Digital and today is the nineteenth of January at five thirty pm now. Well, Maria, I need to ask some general questions about your work here at UNISA. Can you tell me a bit of your role as pedagogical coordinator, how is your daily routine here at Unis@Digital?

Maria: Well, as a pedagogical coordinator, I normally work with the help of a team, right? We have Francisca who does the administrative job. I am speaking like this today because we have a different trajectory. But, I am speaking of the today... So, it is like this: I have the Francisca's administration support in relation to the grades, everything coming from the administration side, students process, enrolment, in all these issues which are related to Francisca's role, i.e., related to Francisca or to myself. I have Sara that deals with interactivities; she follows the teacher's interactivities and verifies how the teachers write. She gives some suggestions and all of this is discussed among us. We have Ricardo that deals with the ambiance part, normally, even if it is a pedagogical subject I try to discuss with them. I say: "let's look at this issue, let's try to do it this or that way", but always with the team approval, I try never to work like: 'Oh, I think that this is best done this way so, I will do it like this', I could work like this only on those occasions that people don't give me a better suggestion or do not show me that there is a better solution than mine. But, apart from this sort of situation, I always try to work, discussing the issues with the team, everybody evaluating together and re-planning together. In reality, my role nowadays...we have the extension courses, we have the modules we teach and now we are getting the eighth module in the graduation course.

Therefore, it is like this: we discuss, I start to work with the teachers authors, what is to write a module having in mind distance learning, what and how they should write it. We provide a bit of orientation regarding the production and the authorship. At the same time, I discuss everything. I do not discuss the content because I think the content is particular to each author, but when I read the content I

always discuss it from the level of my comprehension what should be done, what I think that will work or not in terms of the graduation content because, I do need to fully comprehend what is going on independent of having full domain of that knowledge area.

Andreia:

Ok, to help the students

Maria:

Exactly. It is in terms of comprehension, right? I do not discuss with the exact content of his knowledge because that belongs to him but, in a sense, I need to comprehend whether the matter being studied is about Piaget or whether it is about the office where Piaget used to work. It is on this level that we have the discussion. It is a discussion really aiming to understanding. On my daily routine I deal, besides the teachers... I mean, I am starting talking about the teachers because they are the entry door to UNISA Digital. The teachers become the teacher instructors and here they are called the teachers-supervisors which have a role of supporting the students. So, normally I discuss things with them. I normally work with them the methodological issue. Therefore, my concern together with these teachers is that we can guarantee the teaching quality. So, I think this is the way.

Many times we hear that the face-to-face teaching is easier. As a result, I always tell the teachers that we are not here to complicate the students' life. That we are not to make the available knowledge divulged through out medium, the internet, as a footnote text. I have in particular a very big concern with quality. To have quality means to have a good content material and mainly to work with the students on the best way possible. So, of course, I will try to give my vision of what is the best way to do this. I think this is how should be done: to follow-up with the teachers step by step. To follow-up with the students step-by-step: what does he has to do in the day-to-day. I believe this close follow-up will make the student to understand and learn all this knowledge available. I think that the most important objective should be the student. To make the student learn and making him understand how to transfer the gained knowledge to his/her practical life somehow: be it in an academic or professional life. I think we are managing to get this through the methodologies we are using so, I believe a lot on the methodologies and I think they facilitate the student learning. So, overall my main objective is learning: before we get concerned with grades, even if the students are worried with tests and exams, the concern should be learning and how the student is learning. This is my main concern.

In my day to day routine I always try to work by talking to the teachers about the issues previously mentioned. I enter the system and see what the student is putting there.

Side 2 - Interview com Maria Delanhos

Andreia: So, carrying on with the interview with Professor Maria Delanhos, pedagogical coordinator of Unisa Digital, on the 19th January. So, Maria we are nearly finishing

Maria: right...

Andreia: I would like to know if you have any other general comment about your experience as a pedagogical coordinator of the online course and if there is anything else you would like to add. Things that you might find interesting, interesting for a research, I don't know.

Maria: Right.. Look Andreia, I don't know.. I think that..my experience here is like that.. Just a minute.

We who work with distance learning needs to get to a level of detailing of our daily tasks that is very demanding on us. We need to look at everything and we need to have a very critical eye, a very sharp eye, a very responsible eye. I am not saying that in face to face course is not like that. It is just that in online courses we need to dedicate ourselves even more. The distance learning course demands a different posture which is as demanding as the face to face course but that we need to dedicate more. The big difficulty of distance education is the people. It is not the case that people are less committed or irresponsible. It is not about that. In our case, from what I know in my experience and talking from the viewpoint of someone working in a private Brazilian institution, we see that we still don't have a culture of distance education. People still don't know very well how to self-manage successfully and I am talking about students and teachers.

The way I see it is that we have to make ourselves more present. This presence has to be without my face, my physical presence. This presence can be felt and we know it. I think it is a great difficulty I have to overcome. Of course is not as big as before but is within this sort of context I am talking about difficulties. It is about how people do things. To be able to do things at distance needs to be more special. For example, in a classroom one give an answer and you talk about it, talk about something else, go back to the same issue however, when writing you can't do that because the first answer you gave is there, registered. The first impression is the one that gets fixed. Therefore, I think we have to be very careful, inclusive in relation to the way we write things. One can't write anyway they want. It doesn't need to be an erudite vocabulary but it can't be something like "hell Joe, what' sup?"

Andreia: hummm....

Maria: Can you understand me? I think that there are a few things

that we are building up. I see these difficulties as something resulting from the fact we don't have the experience with distance education. We don't have the culture of distance education. In principle, we don't believe in it. We think that distance education is not serious. I hear things such as: "Gosh, but how a student will learn with this?"

Andreia:

Right...right

Maria:

This is the sort of thing I get but we know that this is not the real situation. We know that...

Andreia:

Right, right

Maria:

Because it depends on the student himself. I am there just as his learning supervisor, just to motivate him. I am just a facilitator. So, I think that there are difficulties in believing and experiencing this.

Andreia:

in having the experience...

Maria:

It is like that. In a general way, I did not enter distance education because I wanted to enter and deal with it. I entered distance education wishing not to enter it. At the beginning my feeling was more like: "oh, how do to do this, oh, how this or that, how am I doing to write a page that will say this or the other, oh how can this content be...and so and forth". Then, I started to analyse the work and I could see that if I work in a page, it will look nice, the content will be Nice. Right?

Andreia:

hum...hum...

Maria:

Questioning: "I wonder if my student will have access to a classical text"

Andreia:

Why that? Don't the students have Access to the printed material?

Maria:

Here?

Andreia:

Yes.

Maria:

It is an issue related to cost

Andreia:

Right. Because it will make it harder?

Maria:

Make it harder. We already did that but this is something that we are also re-planning. The student himself is also very concerned with printed material. I think they find support on the printed material.

Andreia:

Is this a cost for the university for the student?

Maria:

In principle the cost is for the university

Andreia:

And if there is a didactic book that the student needs to buy from the market?

Maria:

Well, we haven't discussed this. We are now dealing with a

project which I think you have been following: the university accreditation and I think that if we are to really offer distance education, pedagogy or a *latu sensus* we have to work a lot on didactic material – printed material. This is one of the issues we are reviewing but, in principle, this will mean additional costs.

Andreia:

Right

Maria:

This is something we intend to look at and I think it is fundamental, to tell you the truth. Initially we had all the content in the screen and we had another format for the student to print.

Andreia:

To print?

Maria:

To print in a different format. We even thought in creating some brochures to distribute but then we had several things happening and several problems so we ended up not doing it..

Andreia:

All right. Thank you!

Maria:

You're welcome Andreia. Good luck!

5.28 Interview with Sara, educational psychologist

KEY:

Interviewer (Andreia)

Respondent (Sara Figueiroa)

Andreia: Thank you... Good afternoon Sara!

Sara: Good afternoon Andréia.

Andreia: Good. This is an interview with the tutor, Sara Figueiroa and today is 19th January 2005 at 18.30. Well, Sara. You are the educational coordinator of the psychology part - education psychology. Can you tell me a bit about your position?

Sara : I am a psychologist..

Andreia: hum...

Sara: I am an educational psychologist and I work with the cognitive aspects of adult learning via computer as a tool.

Andreia: right. And how do you explain this on the day to day life of UNISA?

Sara: This is applied on the way the students use the tool which is new learning instrument; it is used on the education, cognitive aspects of the learning. The student is used to have the presence of the teacher, eye to eye daily. From the moment the computer was introduced there was a lot of resistance and there is still resistance from the students, concerned that the machine will replace the human being. Our work on the cognitive part is in terms of social-psychological behaviour. It is mediate the use of the computer, the online learning, the web towards the education, in favour of the human being, in favour of the social and not to be looked as something mechanical that distance this mediation. My role in this is to make the content, the texts as interactive as possible through the internet resources bringing closer students, teachers and all involved in this type of teaching.

Andreia: right. And how do you classify your experience with UNISA Digital at the moment in your area. What about the difficulties and the good things that you found. In a general way, how would you classify it?

Sara: The positive aspect is that it is something very challenging, dynamic and that demands flexibility, continuity, responsibility and research on our part. These were what opened our horizons for the education

and applied psychology in this area of human behaviour because to study and behaviour has all to do with instruments used to achieve it. This is an object of study for the psychology research. Therefore, it is positive on the fact that it mobilises and motivates us to grow and overcome barriers.

On the negative side, there are the obstacles themselves. The social resistance, the culture itself is very resistant not only on the student's part but also in terms of the academia itself. Everything that is new causes resistance, fear. We have noticed that and in the four years that I have been in the institution, not only at Unisa but also where I did my Master at PUCamp, my object of study was always about the interactivity mediated between students and teachers and its content, tool. We did a first research with the students who were using this model for the first time and we saw that this fear do exist indeed. This fear came from the lack of knowledge from the university itself and from academicians who were feared to lose space in the education segment. This is what the fear was about.

Andreia:

hum...

Sara:

From the moment the teachers get in contact, get close with this teaching mode they are becoming disseminators. They are working to make this movement progress and to become a democratization of the teaching.

Andreia:

And on the student's part, what is the resistance?

Sara:

At the beginning the student thinks that the computer will do everything on his behalf. He still behaves passively, like a little bird getting the chewed food by the mother. Our student has this culture of being in a passive state in the classroom and having the teaching chasing everything. The more mature students like and dedicate themselves but this is a very small percentage. The majority, I feel, have left everything to be done at the end as usual and as they conditioned to do in a face to face environment. As we work with a progressive assessment and interpersonal diagnostic, the student makes up the grade with its knowledge during the process so we feel that the many students still do not manage at the end to assimilate this new modality of learning and do not commit themselves to their own knowledge. So, they sometimes have a running away behaviour, they copy a lot and think that distance education should be done because it is easier to get a Pass grade. Bit by bit, these barriers are coming down and we notice that some students who are nearly at the end of their course are dealing better with this teaching modality compared to the first ones. There is a need to change the culture.

Andreia:

So, you think that there is a need to change the culture. This is interesting. Is this a process that has to happen? Isn't this something that would happen...?

- Sara:** It is a process. The psychology studies that but, the human being is dynamic. The human being is not a fixed entity and our culture is conditioning. Therefore, the student is conditioned and many times, he is scared of changes. However, saying that, we believe that, bit by bit, the students will change its objectives and the learning will become more significant not just as a result of a mechanical, repetitive action. In the long distance education the student has to give some input, he has to have some input. It is a slow process...
- Andreia:** Slow...
- Sara:** medium to long term. However, I believe that this next generation coming is much more familiar with computers and as the computers are already present in the fundamental and middle school, it is already being used for communication games, virtual societies, and messenger
- Andreia:** Yes...
- Sara:** I think that it will be easier for the current generation to deal with this teaching modality
- Andreia:** **Just one more question to end Sara. What do you consider that is the role of the teacher, tutor, instruction or whatever name it is used here at UNISA? Exactly because it awakes this awareness of online study as a differentiated process, progressive process, what is the teacher's role in relation to that? And what is the role of the methodology used to present the content in relation to all this, just to complement the question?**
- Sara:** Right. These are two questions that I think that involve a paradigm break. There is that one of the flexible teacher who doesn't see himself as the holder of knowledge. So, he accepts and takes into account the students positioning: that the student knowledge albeit not large is as valid as the teacher's knowledge. This helps the student to fit in.
- Our students have been too repressed during the fundamental teaching: they couldn't express their ideas, they didn't have a good self-esteem which made them see his ideas considered less important. So, I believe the teacher is the mediator and he needs to accept the students' input and stimulate this with fewer criticisms because the student who feels criticised on their first attempts will repress their own attempts even more. Our student is too conditioned by error and punishment so, I think that the role of the teacher is to motive this student into safety, into having an assertive behaviour and give conditions to the student to give inputs and reflect about his own knowledge. This should be the role of the teacher-facilitator: to be a mediator and a motivator of a new modality by bringing together what we call a susceptible approximation. It is done slowly like if the student is starting to become literate. The student should come closer to this teaching

modality without too much repression. This should be done without forgetting the student's responsibilities. It is not about providing everything ready in a plate.

Andreia:

Right

Sara:

Not all think like that. We had several teachers with us who accepted and embraced this idea. Others do not have the same feeling. They might find it interesting but they prefer the classroom. There is also the issue of their acculturation process. I think that the teacher role is one of a facilitator, a motivator of the potential development of the student.

Andreia:

And the methodology itself does it have an influence?

Sara:

Yes. Sure. I think that the method used is differentiating in terms of the standards used today. At the beginning this scares the students but we have the experience of face to face teachers who started to work with us in this distance modality and they borrowed much from the face-to-face methodology achieving positive results. The re-assignment can always contribute taking into account the concepts teaching-learning is anchored on the student's significant learning and on the student's own potential.

Andreia:

Right Sara. Thank you.

Sara:

You're welcome. Success in your research.

Andreia:

Thank you.

5.29 Interview with Ms Francisca Meirelles, administrative coordinator

Legend:

Interviewer: (Andreia)

Respondent (Francisca Meirelles)

- Andreia:** This is an interview with the administrative coordinator of Unis@Digital, Francisca Meirelles. Today it is the 19th January, 5pm. Francisca, good afternoon!
- Francisca:** Good afternoon!
- Andreia:** I would like to ask some generic questions about UNISA. First of all, could you speak a bit about your work here?
- Francisca:** UNIS@Digital is practically a new department. It used to be a larger division, but things didn't go quite well so they reduced it. So it is a relatively new division and a small one. So, it is... my job as administration manager here covers many areas. It is not only administration but also customer service. So, in this context, I reply to students' emails, I answer phone calls... teacher's enquiries, teacher's diaries.... Academic systems and processes that come through. This is the administrative part of it. In reality, I would say, it is 20% of my work.
- Andreia:** And what is missing?
- Francisca:** The other part is dealing with people: I read a lot of contents, i.e. I read the contents; I have a general overview, give suggestions to enrich the content, specifically to be used online. Sometimes deal with the teacher, give instructions to the teachers, teach teachers, making material, writing articles, organizing events or organizing meetings, etc. I have to do what needs to be done.
- Andreia:** It is very broad!
- Francisca:** Yes, it is very broad!
- Andreia:** Ok, when you say that it is a relatively new and small department, what do you mean?
- Francisca:** You see, Unis@Digital is a university that started to invest in long distance teaching in 2000. They opened two operational fronts. The U.V.E., that is the entrepreneurial branch: Virtual Entrepreneurial, that was destined to online services for companies, training, etc and the SEDUX, that was the most academic part; it was practically, the internet. The UVE was satellite and the Internet and the SEDUX was basically the internet. And, a lot of money was invested and the projects ended up not taking off even because Brazil had legislation

and conditions which were not favourable at the time. And then, they merged the two departments. I think this was in 2002. It was then that the Unis@Digital emerged. However, by then the big projects they were *planning finished* and we started small t, with online modules that, at that time, were launched as *Scientific Methodology* and *Didactics*. The tutor/lecturer professor Maria wrote the modules, we offered it to our internal public, only at a graduation level. Last year, in 2004, we started to offer post-graduate courses to the external public, but until then it was an internal stuff, it was an investment from the academic board....

Andreia:

from the academic board....

Francisca:

only to have the EAD (distance education) here,

Andreia:

oh, ok...

Francisca:

but we were not making money with it

Andreia:

Hum... and, what is the size of the team today?

Francisca:

Our team is four people, five including the teacher/lecturer Nelio. Because our director/principal, he is also engaged with the post-graduation course, with the leadership side of it, so he is our representative in the academic board, but he is not involved with the day to day of it, right? So, we are four people.

Andreia:

Right!

Francisca:

The group comprises of myself, as the administrative manager, professor Maria who is the pedagogical coordinator, Sara who is the psychological educator and Ricardo the technician... IT technician, web designer.

Andreia:

Ok! Now, Francisca, so your... your tasks, which that are very broad. It must bring you a lot of information in general, doesn't it? So, looking from a perspective of the administration of the ...of the pedagogical side, of reading contents and adapting modules. What are the main difficulties you face with dealing with the public, taking into account the student profile here at UNISA?

Francisca:

Well, it is complicated because, the teacher-facilitator who write the contents, we are trying to improve it, we even provided more training sessions, but initially, the teachers/tutors who wrote the contents did not receive enough information, so they have that concept that writing for the online public is the same than taking the contents that they use in the classroom and put it as an academic file in the Internet and the student who has to sort himself out. In reality it is not like this so, the fact is it is not like this. Therefore, the difficulty we faced was mainly in the content. We could notice that these people took responsibility of many classes would administer the classes but, they wouldn't make any... It was a heavy language for the Internet users, so....

- Interviewer:** yeah...
- Respondent:** we continued until when... it was complicated...we would call the teachers and say: "Oh, come here, what do you think about this or what do you think we can do? what the student didn't want?" Then the teacher would say: "No, I am the author; you cannot change what I wrote". And so on and so forth. We had difficulties like this and, on the other hand, the student is not used to read....
- Andreia:** yeah...
- Francisca:** so, in my position I end up receiving all the complaints. I send them to the relevant departments, but the student complains a lot about the content; that there are too many things, because there is still the feeling that a long distance course is easier, it will be simpler, one won't need to read too much, studying. The student doesn't read the text book, he also doesn't read the content available in the internet, do you know what I mean?
- The majority of the students don't have the habit of reading, and this is one of the difficulties that I notice here at Unis@Digital, having experience with this and other institutions, I think the contents.. They are available only in the Internet, I would think it is important we provide a..., a..., I don't know, an academic brochure....
- Andreia:** **an academic brochure, was this provided before or not?**
- Francisca:** No. as far as I know. What we used to do, was to provide a, a printed material on Acrobat, so it used to come in the format, because now for the student to read has to open the links, print link by link, when he feels lazy he prints only the first page, he follows it, there are many things, many contents so, also many students complain, for example, we give them too many exams here...
- Interviewer:** hummm...
- Respondent:** There was a student that the questions of his exam were in a link inside of another link, the student didn't read and even said: "Where was it? It isn't in the content?" Then we opened it, and told him: "you have to open here and there is another link inside."
- Andreia:** **He hadn't even seen it**
- Francisca:** Yes, he hadn't even seen it. Therefore, I think this was part our fault. I think that we should make the material available, or if we don't have enough financial support to make the academic brochure available, we should at least format the text in a way that the student can go there, print it and extract the whole information.
- Andreia:** **Do you think that the UNISA students would like to see some improvement on what they consider that is missing?**
- Francisca:** I think so, but then we go back to the same problem. We are a very small team, we have one technician. We would need to bring one more person only to do this, because there are two jobs. It is a completely different job to design a course to be available in long

distance mode, via the Internet, and to use the same design, with the same content, to print as a text book.

Andreia: **And, do you use, the modules are supported by didactic books? Many modules didn't have... It didn't have didactic books as reference?**

Francisca: No, it doesn't have. This is how it happens: the teachers, during the course promotion, we say that it is not needed to buy text book, the full content is in the web page, right? We say this. So what happens? The student chooses the online module, he knows that he will have the full content there; he will have to print that content, probably. I would print it. It is difficult for someone to read once and learn, isn't it? The person will vaguely remember what she read. So..., the student knows that he/she will have to rely on that, but the authors use many books, but they are used to, also they mention to the students: "Look, read this book" but, the students will hardly search for the books.

Andreia: **How do you describe the Unis@Digital student, in the media context and in the Brazilian context? How would you describe them?**

Francisca: Look, if they are a graduate student, which is the larger number of our students, they are students between - at UNISA specifically - they are students between 18 and 25 years old, maybe a bit older and they are students from social classes B, C, D, specially here at UNISA, and also if you look as in the context of a the poor region of Sao Paulo city in the South region. So, they are students who work during the whole day and they study in the evenings. It is a student who has a prejudice against long distance course. So, in order to attract students we need to invest massively in advertisement, go to the classroom, and give talks. There is a huge prejudice to overcome. The ones who come to us, they come full of suspicion, do you understand? They say: "I want to see if it is going to work or not". On the top of that, they also come with a different picture of what it is the real thing.

Andreia: **humm...**

Francisca: They do not expect that they must have to learn, they think it will be a piece of cake because we've been insisting with them to join us. They think that we will facilitate their lives. In the reality, they discover that it is the opposite, isn't it? Many of our students commented: "at the end of the day, one has to study more than in a classroom, because in the classroom I sit in the back and be quiet during the whole class, I don't need to say anything and in the online module I have to answer the questions, I have to login to the forum, I have to login to the chat room, I have to interact." So, our student is this kind of student, it is a student that, I think, is not mature enough to deal with distance learning (EAD), it is the student that is used to

have a teacher guiding him in everything he needs to do, he is not responsible for his learning, he wants, he has the mentality that is the teacher that will teach, not the student should learn...

Andreia: hummm...

Francisca: He is not used to do research, search for information, he wants everything ready, done for him, that's it. So, I think our students have a lot to learn yet, because they are not prepared for this.

Andreia: **Would you say this is a characteristic of UNISA students or a characteristic of graduate students in general?**

Francisca: Look, I don't know about other institutions, but I believe that is a general trend at a graduation level because, in Brazil, the educational culture is like this, the teacher conveys the information and the student receive it. It is like that since the kindergarten. The student finishes secondary school and he is not ready for study. It is here the schedule, I will follow it without having people chasing me, saying I need I to go to class, hand in the assignment. They are not used to take the learning with interest; it seems that the teacher is more worried about the student education, than the student himself. So I believe that students who are eighteen, nineteen, twenty years old do not have maturity enough to use long distance education, not because of the technology, because they are used to use the computer but because of the responsibility and self-learning factors, the building up of their knowledge, working in teams, be responsible. I think it is still missing that.

Andreia: **How about the older students from UNISA Digital, the ones who are between let's say, twenty three and thirty years old or more, do they show a different profile compared with the younger students?**

Francisca: Look, if they are at graduation level, I believe that is not different. I think it is about the same. It depends on the student, doesn't it? The student....some of them are very responsible, we have examples of brilliant students from online modules. The teachers get very pleased, they do everything correct. However, I think graduate students are not ready. We compare them with our students from post-graduate courses, they already graduated, and they are students already in the working in the marketplace. They have a different profile. They are older. They have already been working for a long time, they are more responsible, and they really want to learn. Another thing is that the student doing online modules do not pay for this, it is a service provided by the university, so he doesn't care. However, a student from a post-graduate course, who is paying; he wants to learn because he is paying for this. So the difference is, I think, in relation to the levels: graduation, pos-graduation. I think that the student interest and maturity changes, not the maturity in

terms of age. It is about academic maturity, the desire of learning, to be a researcher, to learn.

Andreia: So, do you offer the extension course, but not the post-graduation yet?

Francisca: Not the post-graduation, we are getting the credentials and we will start to offer from this year.

Andreia: hummmmm...right. Now, initially, what are the positive aspects related to UNISA?

Francisca: Do you mean in my professional experience or what I see from the students?

Andreia: the experience you have and if you have seen it on the UNISA students?

Francisca: Well, with the students is like this: sometimes we focus a lot on the problems, because four or five complained it seems that it is everybody opinions, but on the end of the year, we sent a questionnaire asking, and great part of students gave a positive feedback, surprisingly enough.. We are left with a bad impression, but it isn't like that. Many students said this was the best think they have ever done, that they really learned, that the interactivity with the teacher and with the colleges was an unique experience, that it is very good to have individual support from the teacher, it is something more personal, it is not so general like when done in an room alone and be there among lots of students and be treated just as another one. That one has a personal treatment, and al lot of students reported "look. It was the solution. I had problems to come to class certain days and because I did it, my problem was I reduced. It went very smoothly". So, of course long distance education gives more time flexibility, more space to do your own thing, if everybody is responsible and follow the schedule correctly and pay attention to the deadlines, there is no reason to have difficulties. I think that in general, people like it but, the ones who don't like it are noisier than the ones who like it. This is because generally the ones who like it don't say anything: they are happy, satisfied, quiet. The ones who don't like it speak more and they complain more.

Andreia: Who do you think is to blame in relation to the comment you made at the beginning of the interview: that it is difficult to get students, what would be the main sources of these difficulties?

Francisca: Well, I don't know if I should mention this, but I will: I don't know if it is in the UNISA or in Brazil in general way, but I speak about this in relation to UNISA because I am experiencing it. I think the academically the course is not firm yet.

Andreia: hummm...

Francisca: Related to the distance learning (EAD), I think that is... the teachers feel threatened because they fear to lose their jobs, they fear the

computer will take over, that classrooms no longer will exist. On the other hand, the university directors say: "Oh, it is being spent so much money with long distance education here in my university that we don't have money even to do the basic thing that it is needed" so, I think that there are many issues; it is a bit of a power fight: the teacher feels threatened and when the teacher feel threatened he transfers his feeling to the students and the student don't have a big knowledge so, he will believe in what he heard and, even more, if he heard from the teacher. I am tired of visiting classrooms, speaking about the modules, inviting students and having the teachers making faces for the students not to come, behind my back. It is hard. We are trying to implement a new culture that doesn't exist yet. That isn't easy to be created. So, we carry on trying. When a teacher says he wants to do an online module, we allow it. The teacher should do it to know the process, so he can see how it works, because a teacher, who does it and comment with another, will give me space to influence him/her.

Andreia:

Yeah...

Francisca:

what I miss here at UNISA is having access to all teachers and doing an awareness campaign because each university has a chancellor each chancellor has a work policy. So it is difficult for us to reach everybody and do a multi institutional job...

Andreia:

Is this included in your planning?

Francisca:

It is in our planning, but again, our team is a small team.

Andreia:

so, it is difficult...

Francisca:

we have a super large demand of work that we have to manage, so this kind of thing that is very important ends up in the back burner because we have to work on the content to be launched in the next academic year, and so on and so forth, it is like a snow ball.

Andreia:

But in your view, is it growing? Is Unis@Digital growing?

Francisca:

I think it is growing, I think so. Each time that a student does it and likes it and he tells his friend, he says: "it is easy, easy to do it; is not a nightmare, you will like it". I think all of this is positive because I think that the marketing by word of mouth is the best thing. There is no point in one spending a lot of money with leaflets and banners and at the end, the person who does your course, don't like and has already affected the whole classroom which, in turn, goes influencing one another. It is the same with the positive feedback. Therefore, I think that there is growth. But I think that it is a small growth therefore, we would have to have more investment. I think the problem is bad with teachers. I think that the academy have to buy the idea first and included in that should be the students, who will feel this and who will want it. If a teacher goes into a classroom and says; "everybody, let's do an online course, because it is a cool experience, it will be good". Everybody would do it because they

trust the teacher. When it is the opposite, the students will be prejudiced, right?

Andreia: **Yes. This is very interesting! Now, in relation to the majority of the students; do they come because you invite them in the classroom?**

Francisca: **Absolutely, we put advertisement in the internet; we put banners and distribute leaflets in the campi. It seems useless. Nobody signs up to do it, nobody comes looking for it. When we go to the classrooms, explain how it works, sometimes we do it in assembly hall but many teachers do not release their students to come to the assembly hall so, we have to get them from the classrooms, one by one. Then, when we explain, show it and so on, some of them come to us. Last year we had a target public of two thousand students. From these two thousand students, one hundred and fifty enrolled online, not even ten percent. So, it's still a small number, isn't it? For the semester modules we had a target public of about seven hundred, and we had thirty for methodology, just over thirty for scientific methodology, between five and ten percent.**

Andreia: **It is very few!**

Francisca: **Indeed. Very small number. And we go classroom by classroom, provide them with texts, explain things but it seems that there is no interest. Many teachers may allow the students to go to the assembly hall but they do only that. The teachers themselves do something else meanwhile. They go the canteen. They don't want to know about it.**

Andreia: **Just a little thing, what are the characteristics of a sequential course here at UNISA?**

Francisca: **I am not the best person to talk about the sequential course but, from what I know about the sequential course, it is a two years course in a specific area, so, for example, if it a degree course, is like a degree course done in two years. It is like that but I don't know how it works very well to answer about it.**

Andreia: **Does it allow the student to enrol in a pos-graduation course?**

Francisca: **I don't know. You need to speak with Maria, but I know that the student will be learning specifically that area that he... because normally the students of a sequential course they are already working in the marketplace, they already work in a specific area, they come to look for a formation in this particular area. So, if someone wants to follow an academic career the person needs to have a degree.**

Andreia: **Is there any other information you would like to add in relation to your personal experience?**

Francisca: **No, the only thing is that I had my master in Education, long distance Technology, many years ago, in a large school. It was another reality**

and when I arrived here I couldn't imagine what I would find. Therefore, even though we have a very small team and have to keep the projects in existence with a great effort, I think it is still a valid experience. Of course that there are many difficulties but, I think that it is a valid experience, because we learn about many things at the same time, not only on the academic side but also, in the administration side and you end up... being part an institutional designer, you end up doing a thousands and one roles at the same time and, all this, is what enriches the experience. Today, if I had to leave UNISA and go to another institution I would be able to write from a project of course accreditation to the content of the modules. One ends up learning a lot.

Andreia: hummm...

Francisca: So I think it is a valid experience. I think that we, bit by bit, can get the accreditation and that will be a large step already as we will be able to offer a long distance degree, long distance pos-graduation. So, I think the trend is an upward curve and I hope that, with this, we will also receive more investments from the institution.

Andreia: **Does the accreditation need to be authorised?**

Francisca: It will be. It will be. From April we will have our accreditation

Andreia: **So, the pos-graduation degree will start in the second semester.**

Francisca: Probably in August, so this is already a big step. I think that what stopped our growth a bit was the fact we didn't have this accreditation, because without it, we cannot do anything. We can really work only with the internal public or extension courses that don't have much validity. So, now I think that we are stepping into the growth path.

Andreia: **Ok Francisca, thanks very much!**

Francisca: It was my pleasure! Thank you!

5.30 Interview with Lucia, Unis@Digital tutor at the annual course on Research Methods

KEY: Andreia (Interviewer)

Lucia (Respondent)

- Andreia:** Lucia is a teacher of Research Methods at the UNISA Digital, aren't you Lucia?
You have been here for some time, haven't you?
- Lucia:** Do you mean in the Digital?
- Andreia:** Yes. As a lecturer teacher here... online. At the Digital.
- Lucia:** At digital?
- Andreia:** ...online. Yes, at Digital, online level.
- Lucia:** No. This is my first experience as an online teacher. I have been here from the beginning of this year, i.e., I have been here for two semesters. To tell you the truth, what is ... in terms of experience, what I really consider is that is too early to make an assessment. I think that it is needed to do an evaluation next year when one can compare for the two moments but, in a general way, it is an experience which is a two way road. At the same, as I mentioned previously, in a first moment it is good. It is a very good experience if the students reply to you but, it is very frustrating if the student doesn't reply.
It is on this regard that I feel very limited: on making the student to interact. How to make the student to interact online? It is a difficult task. It is not that... I also think that one is limited; the people limit themselves just to the indicated activities. Do you agree? I mean, because when one is in the classroom, if one sees that the course is not flowing well, one can direct it.
- Andreia:** (inaudible)
- Lucia:** Indeed. And online that is not possible, because the student has already received it online. The student has already received the activities. He/she already knows what the course is about and then it is difficult to change what you were going to talk to them in different occasions.
- Andreia:** Right.
- Lucia:** So, I think that it is complicated to alter the activities.
- Andreia:** So, do you think there is a lack of flexibility in terms of the content activities?
- Lucia:** I think that we, teachers, are placed in a very limited situation, do you know what I mean? It is like being put in a straight jacket... online. One doesn't have mobility online. It seems like one can't... Of course, I can only know this a bit better by next year. It could be that this is just my own fault. Perhaps I didn't manage to do it as I should. So, let's see.

- Andreia:** Please tell me: you have two online groups/classrooms, is that correct?
- Lucia:** I have two online classrooms
- Andreia:** What is the difference?
- Lucia:** The difference is that the group of students who is already graduated, who is doing a specialisation course...
- Andreia:** specialisation.
- Lucia:** ... the people are more mature. For them is nothing new to have a research project at a graduating level because they've already done it before. Also, they have a more mature choice of themes. They have a professional concern and this is different from the student at a graduation level.
- The student doing a degree just wants to leave the university. The students doing specialization don't. The latter have a concern with their own academic formation and academic quality. They are more present. They take part in forums and they take part in chats
- Andreia:** And what about age? Is there a great difference in terms of age range from the students doing specialization versus the students doing graduation?
- Lucia:** They are older; my specialisation students are older... I have few students doing graduation and few doing post-graduation/ specialisation
- Andreia:** How many students do you have?
- Lucia:** In the graduation course I have twelve. In the specialization course I have four. I had six students enrolled but two stopped studying half way through... although I must say that they actually gave me explanation why they were stopping: it was due to personal problems. It wasn't just a thing of abandoning the course as it happens at a graduation level. In this case, the student just disappeared. So, if we talk about the four students, there isn't too much age difference among them. I would say they have a compatible age with doing a graduation or specialization.
- I think that the issue is not just age range. I think it is also professional formation, it is a demand they feel from the marketplace.
- Andreia:** So, are you saying that owing to the fact they are already inserted in the marketplace they feel they need...
- Lucia:** There is a smaller concern with a Pass. Even because they are not attributed grades.
- Andreia:** Is this in the specialisation? So, do they do it because they wanted it?
- Lucia:** Because they want to do it. That is what is beautiful about it. Then you have another type of feedback. They look for the knowledge. They come to face to face meetings. These are things you don't get with the students doing graduation.
- Andreia:** Don't you have face to face meeting at graduation level?
- Lucia:** I do but very few students attend it
- Andreia:** And what is the objective of the face to face meeting?

- Lucia: You see, I think at in the first moment, in the first bimester is to meet the teacher physically. And I think is great. They want to know who the teacher is. On a second moment, the objective is to clarify queries however; I personally, do not think there is a need for a face to face meeting.
- Andreia: Why?
- Lucia: Because all the queries are discussed. They are solved online
- Andreia: So, this is not a meeting to give a class? So, this isn't the meeting objective?
- Lucia: This is the objective but neither I nor the students feel this need. I attend it but the students do not feel the need.
- Andreia: What did UNISA Digital had proposed to you? Would the meeting be for (inaudible) ...but to teach?
- Lucia: ... it is compulsory.
- Andreia: but to give classes about the course?
- Lucia: No. The students bring their doubts/queries. So, if I have eight students I direct the discussion to the eight different queries they will bring to me.
- Andreia: Right.
- Lucia: Do you understand me? But, I really do not felt this was important.
- Andreia: Didn't you feel this reflected on your course? After the face to face meeting, in terms of them taking a more active part... it didn't have anything that reflected in the...
- Lucia: No, because they did it only... they came in a significant way only in the first bimester because everything was news to them. After that it wasn't news any longer. So, in the face to face meetings I was always having only two or three students, always the same ones, the best students. They came just to say they came. I saw their behaviour as way of them showing that they were committed to the course not they needed it.
- Andreia: I understand. Please tell me something: do you think that the subject taught online can have an influence on the course itself? For example, in Research Methods: you had 'x' experience in the scientific methodology course, some frustrations and some successful things. My question is: if this was another subject, do you think things could have been different?
- Lucia: In terms of the graduation I feel the following: in some ways, the students have already had a fail in Research Methods during the face to face course.
- Andreia: So they came because they were re-sitting the course?
- Lucia: Exactly. So they get here... because research methodology is a very difficult subject, they consider it a very, very difficult subject. They consider it very difficult taken into account the experience they had previously.
- What happen is that they come with an expectation that less will be required of them; that the course will be easier and less demanding to deal with. So, in fact, I think that they have their expectations frustrated.

- Andreia:** Right. So, do they come with an expectation that is less demanding on them because they studied before or because they think that an online course is easier?
- Lucia:** Because online course is easier. I think that they think among themselves that it is easy. There is the beginning of the development of this culture among them: online is easy.
- Andreia:** Do you think they are developing this now?
- Lucia:** Yes. This is my opinion but, it is difficult to evaluate that
- Andreia:** Do you think that they already enrolled in the course thinking that online would be easier?
- Lucia:** Indeed, indeed. This is what I think.
- Andreia:** And from where this way of thinking comes from?
- Lucia:** I think that is because it is still something new. I don't know. I think it is the thing of them thinking they do not have a time to do things...the flexibility. They do not know how to deal with the flexibility and this is immaturity. And this is the exact same thing that happens with a freelance professional: or they work a lot or they don't work anything.
- I think that there is a need of having a meeting with the students who are entering an online course, it is needed to have a face to face meeting with them, to tell them about the difficulties, I mean, not the difficulties, to tell them about the reality of doing an online course. To tell them that online course is not that different from face to face course. On the contrary, I think that in an online course we (teachers) even demand more. We are always chasing them.
- Andreia:** Do you think that they accessed frequently or not?
- Lucia:** The didn't access frequently. Well, some yes. Others, not. Actually I believe that the students didn't prioritise the digital. Because it is digital they didn't give it priority. Online...
- Andreia:** stayed behind for the test (?) As well?
- Lucia:** The great majority. The great majority...
- Andreia:** And did they get points from the questionnaire as well? On average?
- Lucia:** They've got points from replying to the questionnaire as well.
- Andreia:** Right. If you had to say something, one, two, three things... If you had to maintain two or three things in the course and if you had to take out two or three things from the course, what that would be?
- Lucia:** It is hard to say as well because I don't have any parameter to make comparisons. I can't compare this year with the year before so, it is difficult. For sure, no...perhaps...look, I think that for the student it is bad this flexibility to replace activities. I think the student has too much time and this is bad. I really think this is bad.
- I think that UNISA should have a closed calendar for the delivery of activities. This means that P1 and P2 can't be cumulative. It should have activities between P1 and P2. It should be one or the other, right? It shouldn't give the

student the chance to deliver in July everything he/she didn't do during the whole year. He/she starts the course in February and delivers all the subjects in July. So, the student does not... the student feel free to not take part because he/she knows that he sits in front of the computer, deliver the work and everything is all right. I think that this flexibility... the calendar should be less flexible in relation to the sending of activities. I didn't feel the forums and the chat were successful. It didn't flow.

Andreia: **Why? How is it? Would they have a question there and they would reply?**

Lucia: It is complicated because the dialogue didn't flow. Do you get me? On the chat I suppose to be mediating. In the forum the dialogue is among them. My presence there is very small but they weren't dialoguing. I didn't feel the forum was successful. I think there is a need of group activities. I didn't have that.

Andreia: **Did the students know each other?**

Lucia: No. They've met here in the face to face meeting.

Andreia: **So, the graduating students are from what course?**

Lucia: many different ones

Andreia: **And do the students know each other in any way?**

Lucia: No. No.

Andreia: **It is one of classroom, the other from another classroom and they don't know each other?**

Lucia: No. For example, I have one student from business administration, from Campus 2 and I have students from the veterinary course, from campus 1. Do you understand me? So, they don't know each other. There are many students in UNISA so; it is just by chance that those twelve people would know each other.

Andreia: **They don't know each other and come from different courses.**

Lucia: Very different.

Andreia: **Do you think that group activities would work? Group activities for them to do online? Why that, if they don't know each other?**

Lucia: I think it should be face to face. I mean, it gets to a limit because the course is... it wouldn't ...I think it would, I would try it even it was just as an experience.

I would take out the forum because the forum has this characteristic of proposing to the students an interaction but I would like more if we did a more qualitative thing. A task to be done in group. This way they wouldn't have just that moment in the forum, on that date, to be dialoguing with each other. They would be producing a material so, their meeting with each, albeit online, would be much more constant.

Andreia: **Right**

Lucia: I think that it would work. I don't know..

Andreia: **And what did you like, what did you find nice?**

Lucia: Oh well. I found it a fabulous experience. I recommend to teacher that dedicate themselves to it; that try to insert themselves in a context of an online didactic system.

It is interesting because in fact it create a great expectation. I think that the quality as well, perhaps this has had an influence in the low quality I felt with the grades feedback because it is a dense course on research methods.

The course itself is too dense. It is not an easy course for the students so; those who were active and asked me to clarify their doubts/queries were motivating me. If it wasn't like that Andreia I think that I would access the site without any pleasure. I wouldn't feel anything. I would feel de-motivated if it wasn't for the nice students who went there and fulfilled the course proposal. I think this is to do with the culture because for us here, we are just starting this process. The teaching system as a whole seems to me, to be crawling in this. Many do no know this teaching system so; we are still in a phase of trial and error. Overall, I liked it. If we do it again next year for sure I will have more elements because I will be more mature and I will be able to compare things.

Andreia: **And what about the specialisation course? All four students got a Pass grade?**

Lucia: All of them passed. They did it wonderfully well. Very, very nice. Out of the four students, two came here. Because in this course it didn't have any face to face meeting.

We went to the library and searched for the bibliography they need reading. It was great the interaction with them. It is like you teaching in a Master degree. They students have other characteristics.

They have a characteristic that is much more...I liked it a lot. I really will prepare myself for the next year taking into account the failures I had because, of course, I had some failures. I already have a notion of the student behaviour. I don't know if there is really the need to be chasing the student all the time in an online course. I don't think this is necessary and this is not something I do in the classroom.

Andreia: **Perhaps a basic principle on the online course is that the student becomes more responsible.**

Lucia: That is why that perhaps it is necessary at the beginning of the course to tell the students what is expected from them. What I mean is to tell the student what are the chances of them getting a Pass grade and what are the chances of them getting a Fail grade. Explain that if they do not take an active part their chances of a Fail is very big. Explain that if they take the chances of a Pass grade increases. Something like that.

I think there is a lot of immaturity. That is the problem. I think that there a lot of immaturity on the students' part.

Andreia: **Anything else you would like to say?**

- Lucia: I just would like to know what the result of your work is because I think your work will contribute a lot to this matter.
- Your study is fantastic because it does give a foundation for the teachers. We can get strength via your work. I think you have a very daring proposal because you put the teachers in front of a mirror so; the teacher can identify himself/herself or not, with what you want to show.
- Andreia: **what do you mean by teachers in front of a mirror?**
- Lucia: Because you... to tell you the truth you study dismantle an unknown situation. Because the online teacher doesn't know yet what is to be an online teacher. Because we are still building this up. Your study is advance in this regard. It is daring on this regard. So, I think this is very good. Therefore, what your study does it to give sustainability. Because we don't have it.. or at least, if there is, I know little about. I enter in the site and there are a few organisations but they are in an embryonic stage still. There is a large bibliography but it is a repetitive one. I think there is still a great challenge. I do not know what other universities does in this regard but, it seems to me, that they are at the same level of progress than UNISA.
- Andreia: **There is one thing you said that attracted my attention. Do you think that in terms of assessment, do you think that the process is correct? Do you think that the adding up assessment is correct or should it be just one text? What do you think about this?**
- Lucia: I think that too many opportunities are given to the students who consequently, do not focus and do not value the activities. I think that perhaps it would be better if we did like we do with the face to face classes: two grades. One grade from 0 to 7 for example and one grade from 0 to 3 for these activities. Because, in fact, the online students should be given the same opportunities given to a student present in a classroom... I do not think that it is the online activities which will define the online course. This is so much so because in a face to face course one doesn't do a monthly assessment. You exposed the student once or twice in the bimester but, online this is done with the student all the time. I don't think this is good. Actually I haven't even thought about it before. I am thinking about this now that I am with you. I think it could be...
- Andreia: **... more focused?**
- Lucia: ... more focused. Something like: "If I don't do it I am screwed". At the moment what the student thinks is: "if I don't do this one, I will do it another one. If don't do the other one, I can deliver everything in six months" but, it should be like this. I don't think the system is designed to be this way. I don't know. I would like to reflect more on this issue. What are the reasons to give so many opportunities?
- Andreia: **many opportunities...**
- Lucia: there are many opportunities, aren't they?
- Andreia: **Do you think that the students recognise these activities as opportunities?**

Lucia: I think so. I think that they see it as opportunity but, that perhaps has a negative effect, a disqualification. Everything is more easygoing. Do you know what I mean? They think 'if I don't do this one, I can do the one or the one. Do you see?

Perhaps it is needed two strong activities: or two of 0 to 5 or one from 0 to 7. Then the student would think: if I can manage to achieve 7 I will make an effort to manage it on the other activity. This is because students and it is horrible what I am going to say, student has to fear something. The student needs to be scared of not achieving a Pass grade. It seems to me that the online student does not have this concern. They think 'I have six months to do deliver this assessment or I have one year to do an exam I should have done already'. This means that everything will be more important than the course and that can't be blamed on the student's irresponsibility. It is due to the flow of life. The student might even think that the course is important but he can also think 'I can do that later'.

Andreia: ...I won't do it now

Lucia: Yes. He postpones it. That is why I think that in relation to this regard we should think in an array of activities because then we will be appealing for one student, then for another. We can say: there is activity 1, 2, 3 perhaps you will get there, perhaps not. Perhaps we needed to do this.

Andreia: Great. Thank you very much!

Lucia: You're welcome

Andreia: And I will tell you about it later.

Lucia: Good luck!

Andreia: Thank you.

5.31 Personal observation of Unis@Digital course

Unis@Digital fieldwork

02/08/04

Today is the 2nd of August of 2004, and I consider it to be my 'formal' first day of fieldwork. I notice that they still do not have the expected number of students registered in the course, and although the course officially starts today, they are still recruiting learners.

The administrative coordinator, Francisca, goes around the classrooms in the 12f courses to talk to the students and to the teachers. She explains the dynamics of an online course but is often faced with a certain degree of disbelief. It seems that many students and teachers at Unise are not very comfortable (and familiar) with the idea of studying online. Someone asked today (she tells me) if the online course would be easier than the 12f one. And the student had a big smile on his face thinking that this could be a good opportunity for an 'easy pass' grade. She told me this is a typical type of question.

I wonder however how long more they will keep recruiting, since the course has officially started. I can foresee myself having to help students to catch up since they were late registered. At least this week is considered a 'familiarity' with the learning environment project.

Let's see

Andréa
at Unis@Digital, 3:30pm

Transcription of personal observation:**Unis@Digital Fieldwork - 02/08/2004**

Today is the 2nd of August 2004, and I consider it to be my formal first day of fieldwork. I notice they still do not have the expected number of students registered in the course, and although the course officially starts today they are still recruiting learners. The administrative coordinator, Francisca, goes around the classrooms in the f2f courses to talk to the students and to the teachers. She explains the dynamics of an online course but is often faced with a certain degree of disbelief. It seems that many students and teachers at Unisa are not very comfortable (and familiar) with the idea of studying online. Someone asked today (she tells me) if the online course would be easier than the f2f one. And the student had a big smile on his face thinking that this would be a good opportunity for an 'easy pass' grade. She told me it is a typical type of question.

I wonder however how long more they will keep recruiting, since the course has officially started. I can foresee myself having to help students to catch up, since they were late registered. At least this week is considered a 'familiarity with the learning environment period'. Let's see.

Andreia, at Unis@Digital, 3:30 pm

Appendix 3 - Chapter 6

6.1 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"[...] Well, some of the things we practice are very much taken, not necessarily from Knowles but, from Knowles and company in principle. Look at the coursework and you'll have an understanding. The students can elect right up front, if they are going for A or B, and they have a different load of activities depending on whether they choose to go for an A or a B. There wasn't anyone this time that chose to go for a B, but we had a B in the past, who would choose to go for a B. Everybody did a final project but we had occasions of people saying 'no, I will not do the project, I just want the information, I'll work for a B'... so we had this flexibility and then, of course, we practice the individual learning contract. We redesign the course to the individual requirement as much as possible. [...] the course was very much self-directed [...]"

6.2 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"[...] the course I am teaching I have inherited from him. And in some ways I teach in the same way he set it up, although it's evolved, but in some ways it is still the same course. And we actually use basic set books he used...books that he was co-author plus a lot of more online materials in addition...so I haven't messed about the course too much because I feel that ... that this course always has had a certain demand, among the electives; nobody else is prepared to teach it. So perhaps I have inherited by default rather than I volunteered for it. It is possible I haven't modified it because it is an extra task which I have no vested interest in doing, you know?"

6.3 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"I didn't orient them too much; I gave support if they looked for it, but not if they didn't look for it in terms of possible websites or what could be read and so on. And... it may be that... I wanted the students to tell if they wanted more...like more direction...or if they were happy with what they got, but most of them were happy with that level of self-direction".

6.4 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"...there's a limit 50-50 or whatever that you can say that is involving students in the planning of their own courses. Half of it is artificiality"

6.5 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"[...] It's all a little bit artificial in that ... in creating a learning contract, there are so many constraints, because it is a course that has a curriculum, that has a set book and so on..."

6.6 Extract of interview with Robert (tutor)

"[...] it is difficult to get a seminar going when the groups are so small. If we had 10 people started, going all the way, things would be much more self sustaining, in terms of the numbers of messages, and then people who are not responding would feel that they need to say something, there would be more things to latch onto... but six people, well, one is setting up or sometimes two of the six are setting up a task for the other students to respond to and, in some cases, people though it was artificial because they have nothing to say and yet they have to say something otherwise it was a total failure because there's no one else there to say anything".

6.7 Language of the task

Learning Activity #1 – Course Participation

Introduction

Pre-module

This activity, as its name implies, continues throughout the course. Also, as this is an online course, the bulk of this activity will occur online. You will of course also take part in off-line activities that count as part of course participation. For example, you are reading some books and papers as basic study and most of you are probably doing this off-line. Even if the material was supplied to you electronically, as was the case of the basic set book by Clive Williams, I am sure that most of you have printed a copy of the relevant chapters and are reading them in a conventional, off-line way.

6.8 Language of the task

You will find three separate discussion threads set up in the discussion area (or click on the link), one for each of these questions. Try to contribute to each of these three threads. You can contribute by presenting your own insights and suggestions, or by challenging the suggestions of others, or both.

6.9 Language of the task

However, when it comes to discussing what you got out of the readings, commenting on the ideas presented in the texts, or using these ideas in a project, our communication will occur online, within the email and discussion area of the WebCT environment. This is an essential part of the course activities and, as most of us are not even in the university campus, it must essentially be performed at a distance.

6.10 Language of the task (from the 'contents' area the course on WebCT)

The first part of our course activities has been to read the book [book title]. This book was first published in 1990 and, as you know, it is now out of print. It is not that out-of-date, however, as the basic principles of adult maturation and changes in how they learn with advancing years have not changed – people are still the same people in terms of learning styles, physiological makeup, ageing process and so on. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that we are living in an area of technological change that is leading to changes in just about every aspect of the society we live in, but the people who are experiencing these environmental changes are, within themselves, much the same as people have been for centuries. Our rate of evolution is extremely slow in comparison to the technological revolution that is taking place around us.

6.11 Language of the task

continued from previous

Having said that, however, new research has been undertaken and the ideas presented in the book have continued to evolve over the ten to twelve years since it was written. In 1997, both Williams et al. contributed chapters on the theme of our course to a book that Charles Dills and I edited (Dills, C. & Williams, C.[the name of the book is stated here by the tutor]) This allowed the authors to present a somewhat updated account of the theory underlying the Individualizing Instruction Model and the practical skills of applying it with adult learners . These two chapters are included in the supplementary materials for this activity. Also, you have been encouraged to search websites and other sources of information in order to locate the most recent contributions to this theory and practice knowledge base. The time has come to review what you have found in your introductory reading assignments.

6.12 Language of the task

You should by now have got into reading the basic set book up to about chapter #6, or maybe even beyond to chapters 7, 8 and 9

Read the opening summary presentation, included in this module, of some of the key concepts and research findings that underpin modern theory and practice of adult education. This is entitled 'Old Dogs CAN Learn New Tricks'. This includes some references, both 'old' and 'new' which you may wish to read

Read the two recent chapters by Sisco and Hiemstra from the Dills & Williams book. These are also included here for your convenience. **Look for** any aspect of adult learning theory or practice that has evolved, or is new.

Locate and read some of the most recent work on adult learning. Once more, look for new or evolving ideas. **Identify** new ways in which the principles are being applied in practice. **Prepare** yourself to participate in an online discussion on 'what's the latest' in relation to both the theory and the practice of adult learning.

6.13 Language of the task

The TASK is to participate in the online discussion, contributing some of your insights on the topic.

What, in your opinion, are the most important concepts and principles related to Adult Learning and the Individualizing Instruction Model that you encountered in your readings to date? Why do you consider these to be particularly important? **Click here to post to this discussion thread.**

What, in your opinion, are the most important points to keep in mind when attempting to implement the Individualizing Instruction Model with adult learners. **Click here to post to this discussion thread.**

c) What, in your opinion, are the ways in which the theory and practice of Adult Learning have evolved in the last ten years or so? In other words, what would you include in a revised version of the 1990 Hiemstra and Sisco book if you were contracted to rewrite it for a new publisher. **Click here to post to this discussion thread.**

6.14 Language of the task

Prepare a first draft of your own learning contract and email it to the course facilitator. Be prepared to get comments and suggestions. Be prepared to negotiate some of the details. Work with the facilitator, and maybe with other course participants, to transform your first draft into an acceptable final draft.

Language of the task – extract 6.14

6.15 Language of the task

The final draft should be submitted to the discussion board for all to read, compare and contrast.

6.16 Language of the task

For each potential content area, please check the most relevant column indicating a 'self-rating.' A tabulation of the most pressing needs for the majority of the learners in the course will serve as guides for me in my efforts to add specific topics to those that have been pre-planned if necessary.

6.17 Extract from interview with the tutor

"[...] They (the students) continued right through but they say all: 'It's a little bit artificial in that, in creating a learning contract, there are so many constraints, because it's a course that has a curriculum that has a set book and so on'. And so that, in a way, the constraints which the university or maybe the school imposes on what is really an accredited course...the topic

and the learning and so on, limits very much how students could redesign the course, and it's very true."

(Robert, course tutor in interview)

6.18 Extract from the interview with the tutor

"We came to the conclusion that really what we were doing is designing individual projects [...] for example, the idea that every student would participate in planning, and ...the basic set books [...] there were some activities such as prepare a learning contract, prepare a self-evaluation and so on which wasn't really negotiable, or what you could put on a learning contract [...] what really came down to was that the one thing that could really vary was the planning of the individual project and that people would do it individually. And then everybody went off in different directions. Quite significant different projects. So there's a limit 50-50 or whatever that you can say that is involving students in the planning of their own courses. Half of it is artificiality."

(Robert, course tutor in interview)

6.19 Language of the task

For each potential content area, please check the most relevant column indicating a 'self-rating.' A tabulation of the most pressing needs for the majority of the learners in the course will serve as guides for me in my efforts to add specific topics to those that have been pre-planned if necessary.

6.20 Language of the task

Read the supplementary materials included in this module. They show how to develop your own personal learning contract. Study, particularly, the three examples of learning contracts, prepared by actual students on this and similar courses. They are included to act as examples to guide you in preparing your own. Also, they illustrate that there is not one unique way to develop and present the contract. It may be in more or less details. It may be presented as a table or as a narrative text. It is up to you to decide between the alternatives.

6.21 Language of the task

Now that you have completed your self-ratings, please go back and numerically rank each item that you checked as either DK or LO according to the level of importance you would attach to it. Use a five point scale, 5 meaning very important and 1 meaning not important. Think of this in terms of the amount of time that you should allot to this topic outside of the time spent on in-class discussions. This might help you thinking about areas of concentration for your term project or to give some focus to the areas on which you wish to obtain in-depth knowledge.

6.22 Language of the task

A Personal Assessment of the course; of your progress

Introduction

This module represents the middle point of the course. It is the equivalent of a mid-term exam – except that it does not much resemble a conventional exam. It is an exercise in personal evaluation, or assessment – assessment of where we are, how did we get here, and where do we wish to proceed during the rest of the course.

Expectations for the first six weeks of the course

Basically, by mid-term, it was expected that all participants would have read the first of the two set books, at least the initial chapters of the Student-Directed Learning book, some other related readings that were appended to modules 1 and 2, and further readings of your choice, either selected from the circulated supplementary bibliography, or researched by you in libraries or in the Internet. The choice of the supplementary readings was left fairly wide-open, so each of you could select material of personal interest and relevance to your context of work (and/or your final project for this course).

The knowledge gained from these readings will be applied in large part during the assignments that are included in the remaining modules of the course. However, the evidence that this knowledge has been gained (or indeed that the readings have been completed) was to be gained from analysis of our interactions, both private (you/me) and public (discussion forums) within the WebCT environment. The discussion questions that were set up in Module #1 are the principal assessment instruments that I am using for this purpose, so far.

6.23 Language of the task

Module 3. I will review your draft contract, together with your progress report, and will reply personally to you, proposing two or possibly three things: I may possibly suggest yet further modifications to the content of your Learning Contract, or to the manner in which you suggest you should assess progress towards and final achievement of your learning goals [...]

6.24 Language of the task

In terms of the intensity and quality of the participation in the activities so far, I am not sure that we are doing as well as expected.

6.25 Language of the task

How are we doing?

In terms of overall scheduling of course activities we are doing all right. We are about to commence the mid-term learning activities and it is mid-term. We may be running one week behind schedule, at most. We will be able to program all the learning activities into the remaining weeks without any problem.

6.26 Discussion forum message

Assessment of Module #1: Participation in the online discussion of the readings.

The three discussion questions set up in Module #1 were designed to explore the content of the first of the set books. They focused on asking you to analyze, synthesize and evaluate the content of the parts 1 and 2 (chapters 1 to 9) of the book and any related supplementary readings that you may have accessed. As explained above, and indeed in the introductory text to Module #1, I was relying on your contributions to the discussions to assess both the breadth of your readings and the depth of your knowledge and understanding of their content. This implies that my assessment should include both a quantitative and a qualitative element. The qualitative element is assessed through reading what you have to say and (hopefully) being impressed by its relevance, insight, power, etc. The quantitative element is assessed by reading how many things you had to say. Also, a further factor that helps my assessment is how you refer to the literature sources you have used in supporting what you have to say.

In general terms, I was quite impressed with the quality of what most of you said. I get the impression that all of you have indeed studied the first set book quite thoroughly and had some strong personal viewpoints. But, in terms of bibliographic support, only a few of you on a few occasions have clearly indicated what you have read beyond this and what insights you got out of these readings.

However, we seldom really got the discussion to 'catch fire'. You can check this for yourself by going online and studying the shape and structure of our Module #1 discussions. Go into each of the three discussion-question areas that were set up. Make sure that you select 'Threaded' and 'All messages'. Then make sure you click on all the small blue arrows that are pointing to the right, making them point downwards, thus opening all the messages in that discussion area. Study the 'shape' or 'pattern' of the discussion. You will see that by and large, we did not have a discussion at all, but a set of sequential monologue statements. There are a few exceptions to this, but most of these are just two people interacting for one or two iterations only. Nowhere did we have all, or most, of us arguing together over some issue.

There may be many reasons for this. Maybe the issues were not important or interesting enough to get us all stimulated. If that was the case, then it was partly my fault in not getting more interesting starter questions posted. But wait a minute! Do I have to do all the work? If you don't think much of the issue under discussion, you can change it. Post your own interesting and stimulating issue.

6.27 Discussion forum message

continued from previous

To tell the truth, some of you did post some interesting and provocative issues. But it seems that nobody else was interested. No one got provoked. [...] Let's see if we can get the discussions in the following modules to really 'catch fire'.

Maybe we are treating the discussion activities more as a place to answer some open-ended quiz-like questions ('this is what I got out of the reading - bye-bye') rather than an

opportunity to share ideas and collaborate in the construction of our knowledge ('this is what I got out of it; how about you?; oh, yeah, how come?; so where does that take us?; why should we want to go there anyway?') [...] It's my experience, however, that a small group of about half a dozen participants can create a very interesting and very heated online discussion if they all get involved in the issues. The result is lots of input from every one of the participants. [...] I hope we move forward into the next Modules with a new resolve to create some 'collaborative group-think'

6.28 Discussion forum message

continued from previous

What is the quantitative criterion we may have in mind as we continue our discussions in the second half of the semester? Well, let's see what we have in the way of statistics so far. I gave myself the trouble to count and tabulate the number of contributions that each of you made to the three discussion questions in Module #1 and to Seminars 2 and 3 so far [...] The rest of you are spread out from 3 to 15 messages – that is an average of only two contributions to each of the discussion questions.

Most of you have said very little so far. In some cases it becomes difficult even to judge the quality of contributions because there is so little to judge. I hate to think in terms of fixed quantity expectations in a collaborative and creative activity such as online discussion. But there are some minimum limits beyond which we do not really have a discussion at all [...]

[...] And that, in addition to creating a much more interesting and useful experience for the participants, leaves a 'paper trail' that allows the facilitator to make a valid qualitative assessment of each participant's contribution.

6.29 Full interview with Robert (Syracuse tutor)

KEY:

I – Interviewer

P – Professor

P Are we online?

I Yes, we are now. So, this is an interview with Professor Robert. Today is the 24th of May, 2005, so Robert, thank you. I just would like to talk a little bit to you about the course I've been observing, and if ___ to one, is about adult teaching, and the first question I'd like to, to ask you is, about the *methodology using in the course for teaching those students online*. So, how, how... what made you decide to go for that *practice of teaching method* which you are using, online seminars, group collaboration, etc. What did you base on the principles that you're actually kind to teach the students through the course?

P Well, first, while going on a tour, partly of this politics question is that, there's a tendency in every department to make it possible to take my master's degree presented online which means that all core courses are often online as well as been offered normally in classrooms and that's not the case for all elective courses, but some elective courses, and this an elective course, are being offered online and... certainly to some extent, in my specific case, because as you know I... I don't live full time, 100%, at Syracuse and not at the University full time. And for eight years, nine years now, I've been teaching most of my courses online because it suits my life style. I'm teaching from Timor Leste one week, from England another week, but, in fact, very often most, if not all the students are campus taste, but are taking a course online because either it suits them, or because it's only available online, and they want to take that course.

I And this is the case of the course...

P This particular case, it is, that's for the course, in fact group small as you know we have only six students after a few drop-outs, and 100% of the 6 students are on campus. They are not all, taking the course online just because it's online and it's not there, not necessarily there. Preference, in fact, for most of them it is their preference online, because of six, 1, 2, 3, four for sure, maybe all six, but four for sure are full, full-time employed. And are studying part-time. And two of them... three of them are employed in roles which involve online leaning. One is the university's webmaster for Blackwood, another one is the university colleges, support person for students in terms of learning problems when they are on online courses.

I uhum

- P So he looks after pedagogical and personal issues not technical issues, and the third who is a girl responsible for planning and designing online learning in another school department.
- I **Right**
- P So, three out of six are people who use online learning, work for online learning, so it's very natural for them to choose online learning.
- I **...to choose online learning**
- P And the three of them I'm not sure, ..., I know one of them is the first time he has taken online course, he was a little bit unsure about what is his style, what you would like... ... was very quite, not very participative at the beginning, but in the end he became the most participative... of the group. And his area, actually he also works for the university, but his area is in sports training.
- I **uhum**
- P He trains sports teams, basketball, whatever, any sort, nothing to do with educational online...
- I **Right**
- P he trains, he teaches, and so he wanted to....to learn about adult learning
- I **Right**
- P And he had no... he just took the course online because that's the way it's been offered. He was very reticent about that, but now he is ...
- I **All right?**
- P doing very well indeed.
- I **How do you think... what do you think your performance was like in terms of doing seminars online?**
- P Well, varied and there is one ... and it is difficult to get a seminar going when the groups are so small
- I **uhum**
- P If we had ten people started going all the way, things would be much more self sustaining, in terms of the numbers of messages and then for people who are not responding would feel that they need to say something there would be more things to latch on to, t ...but six people, well, one is setting up or sometimes two of the six are setting up a task for the other students to respond to
- I **Yeah**
- P and.. in some cases people thought it was artificial because, ..., they have nothing to say and yet they had to say something otherwise it was total failure because there's no one else was there to say anything
- I **they say it to you, that they are thinking artificial?**
- P Yes, occasionally. And, in fact it's online and they.... we had a midterm, an evaluation, if you read through it and you will find one male said that, one female actually was very strong when saying 'one of the things I feel about the course is that it's not picking up, so now I keep going in, finding nothing new to respond to, so I'm frustrated because the others are not responding whereas,

the man said, he... he ... he didn't see anything to respond to. So, it's two different viewpoints.

I Right

P And that's something that's ..., I found in other courses where the numbers have been so small. You need something like twelve to fifteen to be tipping in, much more than fifteen or much more than twenty are unmanageable, ..., almost on this other mode there's too many messages going and too much to respond to. And below... below ten it becomes progressively more difficult to keep things going, unless it's a very motivated group, or very interesting topic that...
...someone has something to say

I **Do you think this course could be delivered, ..., using another type of pedagogy or method instead of asking the students to do the seminars? Would you see it being delivered in a different way or did you choose it because it would be something more self directed, related to the course content?**

P I chose it for that reason...

I Yes?

P But it obviously could be, and, in ..., in ..., in other ways, this particular course has a long history. As you can see from the transcript we have, ..., had permanent visitor who is author in a research in the area of learning. In fact, just to put a little bit of history to this, for internal political reasons, ..., it is going to, ..., the School of Education in Syracuse some years back, ten years back or more had a very vibrant adult education department, which was closed down by the dean of the school for political-financial reasons, rather than because it wasn't effective and it was easy to close because most of the students were part-timers. And in fact, even in the mainframe days it used to use online learning as one of the delivered methodologies, because the students are part-timers and it was capped (?) in the state of New York.

I All right

P He set that out all the way back then, ... he retired from university. He now teaches part-time in another university, like college, also adult education. And in fact, the course I am teaching I've inherited from him.

I From him, yes

P And in some ways I teach the same ways he set it up, although it's evolved but in some ways it's still the same course.

I Right.

P And we actually use basic set books that he used... books that he was co-author plus a lot of more online materials in addition, ... so I haven't messed about the course too much because I feel that ... that this course always has had a certain demand among the electives nobody else is prepare to teach us. So, perhaps I have inherited through default rather than I volunteered for it

(Laughs)

I Ok. Right

P It's possible I haven't modified it because it will be an extra task which I have no vested interest in doing, you know?

I **Yeah**

P So I kept more or less as it was when Roger set it up.

I **And he was a visitor in the course**

P He was...

I **which was very interesting.**

P It's the third time I've taught the course or the fourth time. This is the first time the author is a visitor.

I **Do you think it worked well?**

P I think so, yes.

I **Ok. And in your point of view, how much of this course, in terms of methodology again, draws on the andragogical principles, let's say as Knowles (?) used to portrait it ... how to... how does it fit to andragogy as a whole?**

P Well, some of the things we practice are very much taken from not necessarily from Knowles but, from Knowles and company in principle. She look at the coursework (?) and have an understanding. The students can elect right upfront, if they are going for A or for B, and they have a different load of activities depending on whether they choose to go for an A or for an B. there wasn't anyone this time that chose to go for an B, but we had a B in the past, who would choose to go for a B.

I **And this time they chose to go for B?**

P This time yes. So that everybody did a final project but we had occasions of people saying 'no, I will not do the project, I just want the information, I'll take, I'll work for B, so I had this flexibility, and then, of course, we practice the individual learning contract. Approach of time we redesign the course to individual requirement as much as possible. You may have noticed it's online as well, one, no, I'm sorry, it's not online. Although it's an online course it started with two face to face classes on campus. And doing those face to face classes on campus, ... one or two of the students, and, they were the ten in those classes. Ten were present then for those classes. One or two of the students, not necessarily those who were the drop outs. They didn't, they continued right through but they say all, 'it's a little bit artificial in that, ..., in creating a learning contract, there is so many constraints, because it's a course that has a curriculum that has a set book and so on. And so that, in a way, the constraints which the university or maybe the school imposes on what it is really an accredited course...

I **Yes...**

P ... the topic and the learning and so on, limits very much how much students could redesign the course, and it's very true.

I **Right**

P we came to the conclusion that really what we were doing in designing

individual projects, rather than

I **than the negotiation?**

P Yeah. For example, the idea that every student would participate in planning, and... mentoring, monitoring at least one seminar wasn't negotiable, and... the basic set books from...that was understood, is that everybody was added to that individual research of other materials, and, and so... there's also one, or rather two, really...there was one at the beginning there were, there were some activities such as prepare a learning contract, prepare a self-evaluation and so on which wasn't really negotiable, or what you could put on a learning contract but it could vary. So, what really came down to was that what that one thing that could really vary was the planning of the individual project and that people would do it individually. And then everybody went off in different directions. Quite significantly different projects.

I **Right**

P So there's a limit 50-50 or whatever that you can say that is involving students in the planning of their own courses. Half of it is artificiality .

I **Ok**

P Now having said that in terms of type, that sort of ideas in getting involved the student in self-analysis and needs assessment and therefore developing some goals, targets which would then be individually accessed. However, in terms of other aspects of self-directed learning the course was very much self-directed. Of course the students had to do a seminar. How they set about, what they researched and so on was very much under their own esteem

I **All right**

P I didn't orient them too much, I gave support if they looked for it, but not if they didn't look for it in terms of possible websites or what could be read and so on. And... it may be that... I wanted the students to tell if they wanted more ...like more direction...or if they were happy with what they got, but most of them were happy with that level of self-direction

(both are speaking at the same time, difficult to understand)

I **How about the group composition, did they choose who they were going to work with or they wanted to work on their own or they were doing for a particular reason?**

P Yeah. We set up the seminars during the face-to-face classes right at the beginning.

I **Ok.**

P So, by the time we went online everybody knew already what the general team of the seminar was. We had five seminars set up, six which was led by both of us. I led the first seminar, then five seminars which were led by the students. And the students knew which ones they were.

I **Uhum, Ok.**

P And they were done on a sort of vote basis but people t... rolled down the topic free, six topics with about two or three of them we found we needed to fight

about whether people slotted in...

I Right

P In fact things slotted in quite harshly. ..., the last seminar was a pair, Kevin and Dan, they both work for University College, there was a mention before. Dan is the webmaster for blackboard

I Yeah

P and Kevin looks after the students well being who will be in online courses. So they're partners in their work, environment, they chose to work together, and they chose the more techie. The last one, looking at what the technology could bring in and what was the future... future about learning in context of changing in different areas and so forth, because that's the area they work in

I Do you think they would have probably worked on it, face to face, between themselves? So, do you think there is this possibility?

P Oh, quite likely, but knowing them, quite likely. And, If you look what they set up, of course they set up for a very snazzy website. My own feeling is that they had to ... had to do anyway for their job

I Right.

P Or Dan had to do it anyway for his job which was to prepare online resources to help professors at university to set up course and to teach courses online. So...

I Do you think...

P ... he employed part of that as part of their own seminar, you know. They send the students that work and we could've decided to comment and so on but it wasn't designed specifically for that seminar. It was designed because they were being paid for it.

I Yeah, ok

P but when I say them, I don't think them, I think Dan was being paid to do it. Ken wasn't being paid to see this is done... (laughs)

I Yeah, yeah

P It is techie and human. So, I doubt if they actually collaborated in developing in the website cause Dan has been done already, but they certainly collaborated in setting up the questions that we were to respond to in a seminar discussion, as you probably have noticed that it's been the last seminar because things got a little bit behind time. As you could see there was little participation that we hoped for because that was the last one.

I Yeah, ok.

P I did say, please continue after the end of the course but I'm not sure they would...

I They're probably moving to something else now. Let's go back a little bit to something you said that I think it's very interesting. Talking about andragogy and self directive learning, you were saying that perhaps the course was aiming for more negotiation in terms of curriculum, etc, but it was not possible, because there was a set book, because there were limitations, etc. Now, in your own experience, as a tutor online in the

research, do you think it would ever be possible for students to be able to negotiate an online coursing that level or is it too much of an ideal situation?

P Well... yes, I think it's possible. In many cases where it happens but more outside the formal university than in, the concept of lifelong learning the concept of continuing adult education because your job is changing, because technology is changing, because you have to keep up to date. I think happens that way without any constraints, indeed with sitting at the opening university, let's see this basic example, in some of the work I've written as well, it's been not be true 100%, in a simplified way the opening university was called open, because anybody could sign on; you didn't have to, much in the way to pre-requisite requirements in terms of previous course grades, and so forth. So, very much open in terms of input you take as system black box input process output

I **Yeah?**

P Yeah, so, open in terms of input. But, what about process? if you say open meaning have a variety of possibilities, well it's said a variety maybe more now than it there was in the seventies, when you started it, but I wouldn't say it's fantastically open but it is. And in terms of output it's not very open at all, everyone has to take the same exams, the same material applied which is typical at universities, but at the same time, I mean, not quite at the same time, from the late seventies through the eighties, here in England it doesn't matter anymore, but it was replace by something else, the name has gone but in the area a very industry training in the polytechnics, now they are becoming universities and in technical schools they were running something called an open tech which is the same as open. Now, in contrast to the opening university, open tech was open input process output.

I **Everything?**

P Yeah, basically, it was run in the basis that somebody was in the job, and they needed to learn something. You know, to keep burst of the job it won't happen changing nothing in the company, so they more or less collaborated fully, with faculty, specified what did they would need to learn, and they would learn it and get something to the job but they weren't aiming specifically for degree or anything else that had a cache, this is a degree which is recognized and so on and so forth.

I **Right**

P They just wanted to get rest of the job. So what've been learned and they have been evaluated about and what the objectives were, was all negotiable.

I **All negotiable.**

P And it was running for decades or more as

I **So I think that**

P Presumably they needed to change the name, because the government changed and so on.

I **Sorry. I think, perhaps this way of studying in which the input and the**

process outcome isn't open is perhaps more ideal to work basis learning than to an institution like the open university for example. Could we ever achieved that, and do we want this, how?

P No, unless the universities take the example of the course we are talking about and the other courses at university college which is about Syracuse office...Many of those programs are very flexible so that, ... influences the students that study the organization behavior course in mean but are studying two other courses this semester, whatever, and they take from this smallest board of things of interest and whatever without any, very much restrictions on the part of university. So there is a restriction that to get a degree you have to get 'N' credits, set amount of credits

I **Ok**

P But how they construct their program is very, very flexible indeed.

I **how about the course charge(?)/ time(?) when they are registered.**

P ... when they are registered on the course and as you could see from the way that course the way it was, there was also set books, there was also a strain on the curriculum.

I **So, there is.**

P but it's something it combines an organization behavior with astrology, in the same degree. As you can see it's possible.

I **You're talking... I don't know what you are going to do with a degree in that but...I don't know... yes, ok.**

P That's very much in general education so in the field, but no, no, I think you would agree that it makes much more sense in vocational education where nobody knows better as to what has to be learned as a learner because in the job they are not being able to formulated but they can formulate the problem with the helpful expert. They can transform the problem in an agenda, but they know what the problem is and they grow a work situation better than anyone else does.

I **So, are you saying that negotiation in terms of course delivery is good up to a certain extend because after that we have institutional barriers whatever but to the extend you can do it it's something good to do with other manners is that what you're saying, that is good to be able to negotiate a little bit here a little bit there. Do you think adult learners tend to like this kind of approach? Is that what you're saying?**

P I think so, I tend to. There are a lot of things which maybe, you know, be away to the interpreting, the learning and doesn't seem to work on practice. And in respect of the self directive tend to be going away, choose what you want and I find the experiences in Brazil that adult's groups were upset when they weren't directed. Because that's the way we were brought out of all our education, because they never had an experience in that situation. Not just in Brazil, but if you read the discussions of the seminars, there are people in this little group I've been studying with who would be saying exactly the same things about North American students, that some are not ready for self directed learning or

no wishing it, and if you, particularly Debbie has been saying something on the seminars. In her experience with the groups she's been teaching other with her own system, adults groups, really seem to work out the way they suggested to work out

I It's not quite the same. So, basically you think that educational tradition in which the students have been brought up, actually can play a role when the students further on started studying online...

P I think, I think very much so, and I may be a hectic (?) here. In adults learning terms, but some principles on I don't want be, I don't want learn, when they have clear on what they're learning, they will see the practical value of education what they're learning and so on and so forth. These are some of the things I feel yes, it is true, but this is true for young children, and differences possible is not so much adults are different from children, but in that respect, in that in a different aspect the children will do things to please the teacher and adults won't. So, adults won't stand for wasting their time but children do have to waste their time. but they also will have the clear idea on what to goes on and... this is the difference, and perhaps what suggests between adults and children in terms of learning. Most of things in adult learning would probably make as much sense in school learning if applied, and I record, in the 1960's, in the last of schools, there was a lot of working on individual learning practice with private school children where methodology was reused, and that encouraged children to be self-directed. And, for example, I visited one of the schools with a professor from a college education, who doing a research and these were secondary grade primary school children, and they were all working on different things and when I walked in, I'd never been there before. I really became a learning resource and he immediately came to me and said what can you do to help me do my project, so I they would, these youngs, seven year old, six year old, eight year olds, would, would takeover. And any coming in, as good as anyone else, in terms of being resources with information in order to continue with their project. They were working at the age of seven, we imagine, the adult group, you know, that's the way to set up, that's the way they were learning from the beginning of their school experience.

I All right, perhaps it would a bit easier to go to ...

P The research said this was an improvement, it was typical in any part of school at that time. So basically, what you are applying is Adult's learning principles with kids they find also positively. That's why I sort of think that it is in part inherited and maybe it's not the differences between adults and children in terms of learning styles scales so much as their place in society, what do they stand for, what they expect, mainly when they have been brought up in another country, another culture, it takes very much difference in any aspect, perhaps very different

I it's possible that having a very mix group it could be quite difficult whether to decide to self-direct learning in a very mixed group, you know international students, you never know

P there was some comments in our course from, from ___ who is Chinese, about

how he didn't think Chinese students were as ready as American students to learn a self-graduate because this is not something promoted. Even the university courses as well.

I Do you think there's a real difference between andragogy and pedagogy? I'd like to make this question because some people say it's really andragogy is a branch, pedagogy is another thing, no it's something completely different, there's no such thing as andragogy, so what's your perception of it?

P If I'm correct the original Greek root, pedagogy has something to do with the study of children, learning for children and the changes from children to adulthood, which is ok, if I'm looking at this, but if I'm studying in the area it's nice to have an extra name. Probably it was said to a lot of people. Certain someone use it, because of it's politically useful to have a different name. I'm remembering something from a conference some years back in Poland. I think it was andragogue. Different from pedagogue, but it was a name to define a category of studying. I think it's quite politics, the difference. This is my focus, my view, you focus is on children, my focus is on adults. Now the question is when you get into this focus, to go back to two minutes ago, maybe the differences are not really as big as some of what's said to make it sounds like, maybe it's to build a career. Let's say what is interest and what is different.

I Even if it's applied to online learning? Do you think there is any change considering online education of adults?

P there's a tendency adults being less technically competent than children in terms of operating equipments and so forth. Some problems may arise. To give you a practical example I am not sure I'm answering the question you have in mind. A few years ago we had a group of students from IBM Canada, taking the Syracuse's Master Degree in education technology. There were 32 of them. They were all adults, they were, some of them had 20 years of experience in trainers and business, they were all employees at IBM at that time, not all of them were, but the time they finished their degree, not all of them were employees because IBM was not basically looking for basically an online distance delivered masters program that they could put these people on, they wouldn't, they would release other people in terms of their experience I think, and they had a lot of people with experience who could go to other jobs, ready for self directive educational program training, but they had no qualification because they'd been professionally ----- a lifetime. And, so this is a very interesting degree group, maybe one third of them who took a master degree program didn't have a bachelor's degree, and they were accepted on basis if you do the first two courses and do well you're in, if you do badly, you're out, which is something we also practice at Syracuse with executives MBA. After all, why do you have to have Bachelor's degree to have a master? Sometimes because it's so much pre-learning you need that, if you haven't done bachelor's degree you can't really continue on, but in the area like education technology, on management there's no much pre-requisites, so the other reason is, can you learn, are you a comfortable learner. You haven't proved that at university level because you haven't been to a university. So, prove it. Sign on provisionally, doing well on the

first semester, you're in. Once you had more than one group in that position, this is one of the online courses, and the technology in Syracuse was primitive at that time. It is before Internet. It was a bit-net. The main frame base for online learning. It was embarrassing because IBM people were much more advanced in terms of technology than university was. We couldn't use their network because they didn't want to let university in because of security reasons. So the IBM people used the university facilities rather than their facilities. So we were expecting, I was expecting, I was responsible for negotiating the program and teaching this course. I was expecting it prove to be so much more computer literate and happy, and that's on the environment than students typical in the graduate programs, taking on a graduate course, and this was 15 years ago? When people were not exposed to technology, unless they were working at IBM. So, the big surprise came with this course in learning theory. They were a very good group. All 32 got good masters degrees. Despite some of them didn't have bachelor's degree, in that first experience, they demonstrated a lot of difficulty in learning to learn in an online environment, and in fact at the end of the first course, several people, we have three questions, four questions in the course evaluation like what was the most interesting thing you learned from the course, what was the most useful thing from the course, and what do you think could be left out? And among the interesting or difficult things, one of the most interesting things is that everything was ok, but the most interesting is that I had to learn to learn online. And I was surprised, because they worked online all the time, as professionals and the question was, what did you find difficult? One reason that came out was I'm reading a message that's been posted, and I think about] it when I compose a response comment, everybody says the same so I go back and go back again. It's the same, someone else said the same. I thought very frustrating. And so are the differences in raising your hand to ask a question in class and say Yes Mary you're going to say. I can't see the difference. We live with that. I suppose having to type and having to discover is more frustrating than just thinking out and say this. I think people work to right now, because they are using e-mail, etc, I don't think anyone has much evolution as over years ago. So there's a learning cover at technology. And I'm pretty sure children are coming, they are already in that world.

I There's a couple of questions I'd like to ask you, before we finish, and one of them is having that course in mind now. What do you think was the role, the face to face meetings, prior to the online beginning of the online course, did it make any difference to think the way the course happened because the students knew each other dace to face, because they had had a contact to you, did it make any difference at all?

P I think more that I ever imagined, the reason for having them was not because it was ___ because it's late as a normal online course, but I find it convenient to meet the students, and almost always, I am on campus, during the beginning of the first month of the semester, and then I'm not, and so it makes sense to meet. It wasn't obligatory to meet, but in fact everybody did turn up, at least in one or two classes, not necessarily both and the practical aspects for me were to know the students a bit in a sort of preparing the aspects to knowing people to seminars. Doing it by vote and so on, negotiating with them and my reasons are

so more practical reasons like that plus getting to know you, although all of us have a routine and so on. So I would say from my view point that those sections are expected, not obligatory, not necessary but if you get back to the course evaluation you'll learn people saying it was the most valuable part of the course, you call on the students to set up her seminar in row, let's look at this course. Unfortunately that's the one before last, not blasted before last one. People are losing esteem as well, then there was less discussion there but there was a certain amount of _____... face to face was a better way to call their__ they would say. And the first two weeks when they got a lot out the course it was more frustrating to get the course online, so maybe the course was not as fantastic and experienced as we hoped it would be for all of them. I think despite of the small number, set me a large number in the past, the same course, the same way, had not generated that sort of comments but it may also be the characteristics of these specific students.

I Yeah if they've had 100% online, they would have had the element to compare it, in the beginning.

P They wouldn't.

I they would, probably, have a different attitude toward it. Would you consider this course, face to.. ..., a blended course, not really, because of the meeting were only in the beginning

P I don't know what a blend really means, but they had just two classes in the beginning and then go online for a few months it's not very...

I blended. Yeah, in that sense. Ok. A final question

P The other one, the course could be considered more blended because of one week, eight days, three hours a day. If you count out the number of hours that is expected for three hours course what you done it's really that 50% of the motion contact hours to one week and spend the rest was three months online. Although in reality they had a lot more online, but a so much bigger component is obligatory for the students, they have to be present for a 100% through that unit so that's more blended, not very blended in the sense to mixing them two.. In part A and part B, B is online A is not online. But in this particular case, the two kick off classes, just the two, because on campus they all will meet and it is convenient.

I Do you think online courses should have this issues elements or you can see it's not essential?

P Depends on the course, sometimes it's possible sometimes not, I think it's a good thing, yes.

I Ok. In terms of personal e-mails...

P Other occasions, when I'd been on campus it was more blended, you know, we have meeting in the beginning, meeting in the midway, we had meeting in the end.

I Now, Did you exchange personal e-mail with the students, e-mail that were not on the system, but if they had any questions or they wanted to complain of that they were enjoying very much. Did you have this sort of

exchanges, did you? Did they say anything particular about the course?

P Not many exchanges. There's an e-mail system that's separate normal e-mail, and so on and so there. And you haven't seen that problem there because you would direct the issue one you would go through it, you'd find it and call it, for the whole courses.

I **So, when they have to say something,**

P there was not a lot of messages. It is a dozen or so messages

I **So it was not... I'm asking you because I found that in the course I was teaching in Brazil there was a lot going on behind the scene, I should say in this personal communication with the students I used to have. If they were liking it, enjoying it, they would say to me in my personal e-mail, and if they don't, they were not searching on my personal email. So what I could see there was public and something really playing in that sense, did that happen?**

P The comments on that nature what there are, it is largely posted in the public. I don't recall any complaints. In fact some of the personal e-mails were just posting their work. Saying that I didn't manage to get a top online, in the discussion area, so here it is. Could you get it up for me?

I **Ok, that's another use of the personal e-mail.**

P Yeah

I **OK.**

P In one or two cases, I had a long discussion with Dan. Not long but two messages or three which stood on private area not in the public area. You might remember. One point I, he had mentioned something which made sound like he had access to material of the course from the previous year and what case he had, so I responded in the public area saying ...you know...from the comments it looks like you have access to previous course and he replied: no, in factit so happened that it belonged to me. Updating the course from last year, one more way to getting into some of the talking, and one method getting in was overlooked. So if you were doing and you used a particular manual, you could get into some of the transcript which students from last year had been. They weren't wiped out; they have been simply locked up. There were three doors, and I didn't know that door existed. He is a webmaster, he found door, and he just saw it was there so, we had several e-mails to clarify that, and actually if you close the door, you'd say, this is what I did, so then I made sure we closed that. But that was like solving a technical problem.

I **But was he using it for any purpose, trying to have the task done in the needs... I'm going to access that, to use that. How did you end up that?**

P Well, if you recall, you were there at the time, the public part of the discussion started as Dan posted something in response to a review which said more or less that this year's review is exactly the same as last year's review. What happened is that he, accidentally, accessed last year's review.

I **Oh accidentally, right.**

P He thought it was this year's review and when I said: it looks that there have

been accident and we went to talk about it and I told him: you must have accessed the wrong file, how could you do that? that happened in the private. What happened in the public area is that he said this which could be constructed as a criticism of the course of my teaching, and I responded saying that it sounds last year's course but he couldn't have access to that and he responded in an extensive way which point it got into the private, private email student section, clarified and so on. But those first three interchanges were public scenery.

I **OK, Well**

P **But that was purely technical issue that led to a misunderstanding.**

I **Misunderstanding, yeah, ok. I think I'm very happy with this, if there's anything else you' like to say that's fine, or if not, thank so you**

[END OF THE INTERVIEW]

6.30 Personal observation of Syracuse course

Milton Keynes, 08th June 2005

Syracuse course - personal note

Today Robert, the tutor of the Syracuse course, paid a visit to the Open University in Milton Keynes. It was lucky because then we could do the interview that we were set up to do by phone fac-to-face. It was a nice conversation, and I believe the interview is offering me good data in which to think of their context. I thought it was so interesting when he explained he inherited the course from another tutor, and that's why he didn't want to change it much, amongst other reasons. And quoting him "half of it is antiquality" :-)

Andrew

17 15 h

Transcription of the personal observation – Syracuse

Milton Keynes, 08th June 2005

Syracuse course – personal note

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Andreia

17:15 h