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DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING THROUGH E-TIVITIES

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Developing assessment for learning
through e-tivities

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Introduction

Online learning activities or *e-tivities* (Salmon, 2002), in their various guises, can provide for the development of socialisation, teaching, learning, and assessment for students in Higher Education. There is substantial evidence to suggest that learners' engagement with online contributory work correlates with the strength of the link between those activities and assessment: the stronger the link, the higher the engagement (Dweck, 1999; Taras, 2001; Bernardo et al, 2004; Rovai, 2004). The Adelie project aims to embed good practice in re-design for e-learning, build capacity within the institution and enhance the learner experience. This paper focuses on assessment *for* learning (Black et al, 2004), as opposed to assessment of learning through e-tivities. We present a framework for linking e-tivities to assessment.

Background

Adelie is a one-year Higher Education Academy-funded Pathfinder project aimed at embedding sustainable and pedagogically sound e-learning practice across the University of Leicester, with a focus on re-designing to meet the e-learning and assessment needs of specific academic departments. In doing so, it builds capacity among University of Leicester staff. By bringing together pedagogy, subject knowledge and e-learning design, Adelie researches change occurring as a result of the normalisation of sustainable e-learning practice at three different levels: institutional, teaching practice and learner experiences. This paper presents the main findings of this project in the area of improving assessment *for* learning through e-tivities.

The Adelie Project attracts small teams of academics working together on a new online course, or on an existing course that will incorporate online components. Part of the research team's work within Adelie involves running two-day discipline-specific workshops called *Carpe Diem*. During *Carpe Diem*, teams are invited to reflect on appropriate assessment practices as they design online elements for their course. Among other activities, participants develop e-tivities that align teaching practice, learner engagement, formative assessment and summative assessment. By the end of day two, they have a set of relevant e-tivities running on Leicester's virtual learning environment (Blackboard).

For the purposes of understanding the process of embedding and adjusting our interventions to encourage and disseminate good e-learning design across the university, data is collected at various stages of Adelie. Interviews are conducted before and after *Carpe Diem*. Observations during the workshops are carried out. The data is analysed using QSR N6 (Nudist). The e-tivities produced during and after the workshops are also analysed, in particular their links to assessment. By April 2007, 13 *Carpe Diems* across 11 disciplines had been run, involving 70 academics who developed in excess of 50 e-tivities.

Findings

E-tivities designed by course teams during *Carpe Diem* workshops are varied in terms of purpose, clarity, design, length, demands on the learner and use of technology. Some are clearly written for formative purposes, while others are of a summative nature. The use of interactive discussion boards is central to some e-tivities but marginal in others. Fit for purpose e-tivities, whether in a blended or distance learning course, identify core or threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2006) and provide a scaffold for the appropriation of these. They build interactivity, collaboration and opportunities for independent and inter-dependent learning into their design.

Assessment is a key catalyst for change during *Carpe Diem*. Assessment shapes and constrains course design and the design of e-tivities. At stake in the decisions is tutor time and fears of plagiarism. Some subject teams are reluctant to put resources into e-moderation and the formative assessment of students' work. These participants do not regard online collaboration, peer feedback or self-assessment as relevant (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Other subject teams are suspicious of collaborative e-tivities which, they claim, cannot be part of the assessment because of what they regard to be an opportunity for plagiarism.

Subject teams planning and designing e-tivities for assessment followed the models presented in Table 1. These models are grounded in the data collected through observation of *Carpe Diem* activity and in the analysis of the e-tivities that the teams designed. They show four typical responses to the problems of designing for learning and assessment.

	Links between e-tivities & assessment	Rationale	Tutors' actions
1	Output of e-tivities is (part of) the assessment.	All e-tivities designed to be assessed and may replace essay.	Assess after submission.
2	Two sets of e-tivities: compulsory and optional.	The former to carry a proportion of grade and may replace essay, the latter not formally graded.	Assess compulsory e-tivities. Some e-moderation and monitoring needed.
3	E-tivities are optional, but their output clearly builds towards an assessed assignment.	E-tivities designed and sequenced to align the development of ideas and content with the requirements of a subsequent assessed assignment.	Formative feedback as part of sustained e-moderation is paramount.
4	E-tivities are optional (not assessed).	Keen students given opportunity to learn more.	E-moderation optional but key to maximise learning opportunities and do justice to contributions.

Table 1: Links between e-tivities and assessment

The third model shown in Table 1 is perhaps the most interesting and the hardest to design for. It involves a sequence of structured e-tivities, whose design is conceptually aligned with the rubric of the assignment. It also requires a significant e-moderation component. Assessment can be a lever for effective learning if appropriate scaffolding is provided in the form of well-designed e-tivities and good e-moderating practice.

The following e-tivity, adapted from the work of a course team during *Carpe Diem*, is part of the sequence that builds towards the final assessed assignment and provides an example of assessment for learning through e-tivities. It was designed as part of a postgraduate course in Occupational Psychology and is intended to teach a core element in the course, performance assessment. The task structures and scaffolds key aspects of the assessed assignment and thus illustrates model 3 of Table 1.

	E-tivity 3a: Is Performance Appraisal Working?
	This e-tivity helps you plan the content of the report you are required to submit for assessment. It is NOT the assignment itself. It is designed to help you complete the assignment.
	You have been given privileged access to one document and two audio recordings. All parties have given their consent for you to see and use this information, which will help you understand some of the issues that you could include in your report.
	(1) Document: **Job, performance and statistics information.doc**
	(2) Interviewer Training Audio File (55 seconds).
	(3) Audio File of a "typical" performance appraisal for In-Branch Customer Services Staff (2 minutes and 34 seconds).
Purpose	To identify and elaborate on three key issues on performance appraisal.
Task	Identify 3 major issues that arise when you have listened to and read these resources. In no more than 150 words explain why you have chosen these 3 issues. Post your message to the discussion group by **Friday 2nd March 2007**.
Respond	By the **Friday 9th March 2007** return to the forum and elaborate on one or more of your fellow participants' posts, responding to their arguments.

Conclusion

E-tivities and assessment may be effectively integrated into course design following any of the models shown in Table 2, for both on-campus courses with online components and distance ones. While there are no *a priori* right or wrong options, we associate the notion of *assessment for learning* with the third model shown in Table 2. If learners have addressed the sequence of e-tivities responsibly and strategically, they will have a large proportion of their final assignment conceptually written by the end of the course. Being explicit about the link between e-tivities and the final assignment, providing timely and adequate feedback through effective e-moderating techniques (Salmon, 2003) will generate focused, meaningful and purposeful contributions. These will, in turn, lead to improved assessment results and a more positive learning experience.

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