THE FUTURE VALUE OF
COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING (COL) FOR ODL

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ABSTRACT

COL described here is the online interaction between students who are prompted to discuss course-related items for their team assignments. They will be rewarded by marks for doing so. Alongside with traditional examinations, we consider this kind of progressive Collaborative Online Learning (COL) equally as the most important evaluation factor within an open distant learning university of the future. However, the usage of this kind of learning is still at a stage of infancy. Subsequently, the commitment to make proper use of it will be derived from a state-of-the-art definition that links back to the bind spot also of the most recent international publications on COL.

A.   In the first part, this paper focuses on progressive COL by a cluster content analysis. We will ask how many of the current undergraduate programmes at Open University Malaysia are utilizing this idea. As a result, based upon the previous definition, it is stated that there is basically NO progressive COL which is triggered by the tutors in charge.

B.   Subsequently, the paper would like to elaborate on the slumbering potential that lies in COL. The authors suggest that it is not only an eminent tool for the students to rehearse for real-life virtual teams, but it is deemed as one of the most efficient consequences of modern online learning at all.

C.   Thereupon, in the third part, a catalogue of tailor-made recommendations for progressive COL will be derived
- *a)   Entailing the steps of how the usage of COL could be improved.*
- *b)   Comprising of a catalogue is thrown out which proposes a future tutor evaluation checklist.*
- *c)   It will conclude in practical ideas of benchmarking how to trigger COL among tutors in charge.*

INTRODUCTION

Given the full technical possibilities in the 21st century, Open Distance Learning is a promising tool to conduct learning detached from space of time. However, it has never been easy on the learners or the providers. Lacking face-to-face interaction enjoyed by full-time students, distance learners feel isolated and demotivated (Muilenburg & Berg 2001).

Collaborative Online Learning (COL) literally means shared or group learning via intranet or internet, fully utilizes that channel. It is like playing virtual ping–pong by communicating about predefined topics with a variety of different partners. COL is an effective and efficient social process, as learning studies show that properly designed collaborative learning techniques help students to improve their achievement, develop their critical thinking and foster their cooperative behavior (Slavin, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

To accomplish a sufficient level of interaction that is conducive to an active and progressive learning community, a facilitator may opt to incorporate threaded discussions as a means of generating or promoting interaction (triggers). The facilitator must design and manage the threaded discussion to direct students in achieving the intended learning outcomes. However, if triggering threaded discussion is to remain an integral part of the online learning experience, administrators must provide facilitators with effective assessment methods to evaluate student's performance and knowledge integration (Edelstein & Edwards 2002).

Undergraduate learners at Open University Malaysia (OUM) use the University's learning management system (myLMS) to interact with their tutors. Learners supposedly log in at least

twice weekly for 3 months to study a course, and participate in discussions with their classmates. After each seminar, the learners are assessed 2% for quantity and 3% of quality postings online. Based upon modules, the students are engaged to collaborate in online discussion groups, in which they could participate by posting messages at any time, without requiring the simultaneous presence of other learners/tutors. Nowadays, these discussions are mostly at the tutor's and (correspondingly) at the learner's convenience rather than requiring adherence to a set schedule, so that participants could contribute when it suited them, regardless of time.

The role of a tutor is to monitor students' collaboration in order to guide participants in the application of collaborative skills. However, it is hard for a tutor to support collaboration if most of the learners have to be monitored. At best the discussions online become one-to-one or just information-seeking. Therefore, rubrics are designed to help facilitators engage, motivate, monitor, and guide the learner using myLMS.

IMPORTANCE OF COL FOR ODL

Collaborative online learning (COL) refers to any instruction method in which learners work together towards a common goal mediated by the Internet. Usually online is preferred because of the distance between learners, studying from home but with access to the Internet.

To accomplish a level of interaction that is conducive to an active and progressive learning community, a facilitator may opt to incorporate threaded discussions as a means of generating or promoting interaction. The facilitator must design and manage the threaded discussions to direct students in achieving the intended learning outcomes. As Edelstein and Edwards (2002) pointed out, "if threaded discussion is to remain an integral part of the online learning experience, administrators must provide facilitators with effective assessment methods to evaluated learner's performance and knowledge integration".

Collaborative dialogue for new knowledge construction is one of the intended outcomes of educators assigning group tasks online learning environments (Paulus 2005). Putting students together does not ensure that students would collaborate, but Hathorn and Ingram (2002) point out that providing guideline for groups can increase the likelihood of collaboration.

RESEARCH ON CRITICAL COL-ISSUES

Our research is considered as a brief pretest to shed light especially onto specific deficiencies of current 1st generation COL-practice, in order to improve the system. It seems that the main problem is the lack of a joint catalogue how to proceed with the threaded discussion and what to do in detail. Here, we will throw out 10 critical issues, followed by recommendations for an action plan in the next chapter.

1. **Unsuccessful triggers**: A trigger is any attempt by the tutor to prompt the students to do online learning interaction among themselves. We could quote endless examples of triggers like this that finding no echo "please exchange your point of view with one of your classmates" (Tutor 1, 22/09/05). This is an unsuccessful trigger, since whenever this tutor tried that way to access the students; he could not prompt any response, even though once two of them were addressed personally. See threaded discussion 1.

2. **Trigger-killers**: alongside with the tutor's unsuccessful triggers, we found cases when, instead of responding to any trigger, students among themselves tried to clarify issues (e.g. joint worries and complaints why one tutor did not show up online, or the technical question "how to submit the assignment", see threaded discussion 2). However, after an electronic ping-pong match between 2-3 students typically another one diverts to another topic and the discussion briskly ends (Tutor 2, 14/10/06).

3. **Lack of reward** – perception and promotion of current low percentage for assessment (OUM only 5% of all assessment criteria is for online participation at all): This might go along with the (critical) initial announcement of the tutor: "COL-participation is more or less voluntary". As a result, 5% marks could not trigger significant discussion especially

for the weaker tutor forums - unless there are 3-4 motivated students who take over as opinion leaders and run the show. In OUM's future assessment, the weightage might be increased a) undergraduates 5-20%, b) postgraduates 30-40% of all criteria.

Table 1 *Integrated Assessment Scheme for Online Forums (OUM)*

Category	Description	Points
Frequency of Contributions	Contributions have been regular and varied without long lapses between postings	2
	Learners has been present online but postings have been few and far between; learner has been a lurker more than an active contributor	1
	Learners is rarely or never present online	0
Quality of Contributions	High quality contributions focused on task; strong evidence of learners having generated discussion, analyzed information, drawn conclusions and helped create a lively debate	3
	Contributions have been focused on the task; some evidence of analysis, sharing and teamwork	2
	Contributions have been minimal with little evidence of sharing and teamwork	1
	Few or no contributions have been made toward the discussion or task	0
	Total	5

4. **Premature surrender**: After the tutor tried the threads, no one came into the forum and no one discussed will result in the fact that some easily will give up ("I have tried enough", "COL does not work", "its just 5 %"…). Disillusioned by the first attempts in futility to break the ice, they keep it that way and withdraw with the effect that COL remains a bubble. On the same note, there is proven record for a correlation between number of postings and duration days in a forum. In the following table (2) we focused on premature surrenders by the tutors by monitoring their forum postings, particularly the start date and the end date, as well as the distinct number of duration days they could be found online:

Table 2 *Premature Surrender by Tutors*

Semester January 2006 Online Tutor Postings						
Tutor no.	No. of postings	Duration in the forum in days	Start	End	Drop out time (days)	% of available semester time
1	6	1	6-Feb	6-Feb	1	1
2	11	3	6-Feb	10-Feb	4	4
3	11	2	10-Feb	16-Feb	6	7
4	2	2	30-Jan	13-Feb	14	16
5	19	7	6-Feb	21-Feb	15	17
6	4	2	25-Jan	15-Feb	21	23
7	7	5	30-Jan	28-Feb	29	32
8	6	3	29-Jan	28-Feb	30	33
9	14	5	26-Jan	17-Mar	50	56
10	20	10	29-Jan	22-Mar	52	58

5. **Grey eminence phenomenon** (question or answer by one student only). In correlation with a growing size of virtual classroom members, as a tendency merely opinion leaders might be prompted by threaded discussions. On the conditions that online participation including COL is only 5%, merely students who have high intrinsic motivation will give

their comments. For the rest it seems the job has already been performed (tutor 3, 16/09/05) triggers, one student replies, and "that's all", they have nothing extra to add: See Threaded Discussion 5. The rest of the students will remain in the comfort zone, as it occurred to tutor 2 (30/09/05): "Please write your answers". Even though this implies an affirmative plural, if one student will answer, the others might have thought the collaborative work is already done. No one else participates.

6. **Diverted interaction**: Even though this mutual communication is not content-based, it may be stated that so far in most cases students trigger themselves, rather than the tutor. That means that COL might turn out to become rampant. Students interact with another student coming in to the same forum with a big comment or with a completely different topic. No one else feels committed again to pursue and further the previous COL-discussion (example tutor 4).

7. **Sharing websites:** the attitude to copy and paste long passages of text is just an input of knowledge, but it does not generate COL, which is more opinion-based, rather than information-based. Sometimes it appears that some students posting page-long web-information are gazing for compliments and better marks rather than to contribute for COL. Research: e.g. tutor 5's forum, (tutor 6- 01/06) found the same student entertained the rest including the tutor every week by lengthy internet-based answers to the questions the tutor had risen before. In addition, if the source is not stated, it also might be considered as blunt plagiarism, especially if the tutor has not enlightened the students about the consequences.

8. **Perceived technical problems**: These days only a few students, especially in rural areas, do not dispose at internet access at least twice a week. As a remedy, the tutor must find out during the first meeting, and be ready for alternative collaboration with those (few) students. Otherwise during the semester there will be a lot of technological-based excuses, why no participation happens, and the marking of COL will be conceived of as unfair. There may also be problems relating to using the software myLMS where a tutor or a learner may mistakenly post the same message many times. This may be due to the speed of the internet where the screen does not refresh fast enough. Since 2% of marks are given for quantity, this could also be used as a ploy by tutors/learners to gain more marks. See threaded discussion 8.

9. **Human Failure:** Due to wrongly given information or wrong lists, some students might log on at the wrong forum with the consequence that they will not be considered for assessment. Another mistake coming out of unintended course of interaction that would make it impossible for the tutor to treat the students fair is if in the wake of the following semester the tutor is late to mark, and, at the same time, the Forum has already been removed by the administrator.

10. **Time restrictions:** the tutor is entangled in his or her daily work overload and is not able to accomplish triggering, monitoring the discussions and assessing the students' performance. In lack of a clear system and procedure, no one keeps reminding him or her how to perform COL by threading discussions. Regular time blocks for e.g. weekly discussions are not scheduled, with the effect that the requirement of doing online discussion is left with a tutor- and triggerless situation.

From all the data that we have found so far in undergraduate and graduate programs, there is evidence that on a wider scale effectively triggered COL is still in a stage of infancy. From the ideas in literature considered in the 1st and 2nd chapter and empirical experiences we detected in chapter 3, we will derive a schedule that can surpass the shortfalls of the first COL-generation.

RECOMMENDATION

By the commented following "Workflow Implementation" we would like to elaborate on the slumbering potential that lies in the upcoming 2nd generation of COL. We suggest that it is not only an eminent tool for the students to rehearse for real-life virtual teams, but it shapes up as one of the most efficient consequences of modern online learning at all. This is the procedure we recommend.
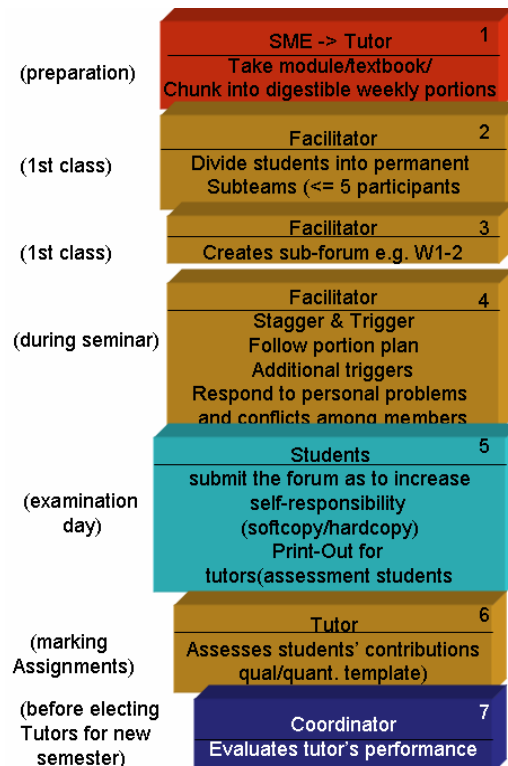
Diagram 1 Workflow Implementation

First of all, the tutor will receive the textbook or the module which is chunked into digestible weekly portions **(1)**. Every beginning of a semester prior and during the first meeting, by choice or randomizing, the tutor divides the students into permanent small sub-teams a,b,c, … **(2)**. To work together as an opinion-balanced team, the number of participants should be between 3 and 5, to enable frequent interaction among all and cause a certain kind of team spirit.

After having clarified who collaborates with whom, the tutor will create forums for every week and sub-forums for every team **(3).** In the following example, out of the Forum "Organisational Behavior" the abbreviation "W2-9b" would stand for "**W**"eek **2** – Forum/Task **9** Team **b**:

*Example: **Activity W 2-9b***

Single-Loop, Double-Loop and Deutero-Learning: Each and everyone, please search the Internet about those three kinds of learning! For each, prepare a control question (quiz with 3 objective questions), put online on MyLMS forum W2-9 and bring hard-copy of answers along to our first meeting!

During the following learning weeks, the tutor will prompt and monitor the process by setting continuous triggers in order to set off collaborative online learning amongst the students **(4)**.We call this principle of threaded discussion "***stagger and trigger***", meaning weekly portions of workload will be given to the learners to discuss within their sub-team. While the triggers are standardized by the content developer (SME = Subject Matter Expert), the tutor is free to set additional triggers to tailor-make the program to the situational needs of the learners. At the same time, the tutor is also present to respond to personal problems and questions and conflicts among the team members. If they are too personal, they will be preferably handled over the email or phone calls during consulting hours.

The whole online discussion will be filed and printed by the students at the end of the semester, in order to compile a hard- and softcopy as the group assignment **(5).** It has been discussed that this part should count between 30 and 40% of all assessment criteria, since this is the image of a continuous learning process between the students, as learning adults and experts.

Upon delivery, the tutor will assess the students' contribution by quantity and quality of their contributions **(6).** The following checklist tries to rate performance beyond subjectivism:

***Table 3** Category Description and Scores*

High Quality contributions focused on task; strong evidence of learner having generated discussion, analysed information, drawn conclusions and helped create a lively debate. Contributions were regular and varied without long lapses between postings   5 marks
Moderate Contributions have been focused on the task; some evidence of analysis, sharing and teamwork Learner has been present online but postings have been few and far between 4 marks **Medium** Some contributions have been focused on the task; however there little or no evidence of analysis, sharing and teamwork Student is not an active contributor   3 marks
Low Some contributions have been focused on the task; little or no evidence of analysis, sharing and teamwork Learner is rarely present online   2 marks
No Participation Contributions have been minimal with little evidence of task focus   1 mark
Zero contributions have been made toward the discussion or task   0 marks

The final step that has to be taken is the evaluation of the tutor's performance **(7)**.The programme coordinator will generate general statistics (A.) and personal evaluation of the tutors (B.):

A. General Statistics (Information that can be used as benchmark with other units):
1. Percentage of tutors participating in the forum
2. Percentage of postings by tutors / students
3. Percentage of tutor postings per semester
4. Average length of tutor posting

B. Personal Evaluation: In the 2nd part of the evaluation, the coordinator evaluates especially %tage of triggers within the forums, and therefore success or failure of triggers by using the following checklist which is self-explanatory:

Table 4 _Rubrics for Collaborative Learning_

Collaborative Online Learning	Excellent (L1)	Good (L2)	Satisfactory (L3)	Requires More Effort (L4)
Big COL-Triggers (Non-immediate response) .1 Tutor ask group to reflect, promotes interactive learning by triggering discussions and inputs of the students. E.g. "Please, can I get each and everyone's comment?", "What is your understanding of …?", "In your opinion, what situation will likely encourage a firm to raise its target debt ratio?"(E.g. Case study or questions).	Big Triggers > 5 (one every tutorial) (< 15)	Big Triggers > 3	Big Triggers > 2	Big Triggers < 2
Small COL-Triggers .2 (Immediate response) Tutor promotes interactive learning by using reinforcing techniques (probing, challenge each other's ideas). E.g. "May I get the responses from ….?", "Do you agree?", "Something missing …?"	Small Triggers > 10	Small Triggers > 6	Small Triggers > 4	Small Triggers <4
COL-Moderation (Personal Answers, Requests, Reaction) .3 Addressing a student personally on a certain problem/topic/request. Tutor is solely responding to the inputs that the students have brought on their own.	Elapsed days until tutor responds as a moderator: 1	Elapsed days until tutor responds as a moderator: <=2	Elapsed days until tutor responds as a moderator: <=3	Elapsed days until tutor responds as a moderator: >3
Reasonable COL-interaction among students (successfully triggered by the tutor) .4 Students discuss among themselves and interact independently among each other, as a result, groups are self-supervised and group activities are self-organized. (Management by exception –MBE – tutor will only step in, if turbulence occur or problems arise) a) Percentage of students in a team who participated for interaction b) no of postings per trigger no of students who responded to trigger => average per semester) e.g. 1 = least score, ranking system, 1st best quarter, 2nd quarter, 3rd quarter, 4th quarter sets the yardstick for future measurement	a) < 80 b) Situational	<70	<60	<50

All the sub-rubrics elaborated in B., will be due to an evaluation for the future. This evaluations consist of four categories (L1 – excellent, L2 – Good, L3 – Satisfactory, L4 – requires more effort). It is helpful if a research assistant collects the material the programme coordinator requires in order to come up with an evaluation, because the gathering of those data might be time-consuming.

CONCLUSION

COL is deemed to be the most important pillar of online learning. We suggest that it is not only an eminent tool for the students to rehearse for real-life virtual teams, but it is deemed as one of the most efficient consequences of modern online learning at all.

However, in practicing its principles, due to the lack of a systematic catalogue, specific hiccups had to be faced. Those can be circumvented and COL can be successful, if –out of the potential pitfalls mentioned above- a clear-cut procedure is considered and thoroughly implemented. As the Senior Vice President of OUM, Prof Dr Ansary Ahmed has put it: Without compelling need there significant COL is not going to happen. At the first place, this kind of (sleeping!) demand can be derived from extrinsic motivation receiving better marks by embarking on COL. The education provider has to reward them, and maybe not only by granting more than a certain added percentage for the assessment. The greatest reward of all is to obtain what virtual forums are made for: a lively dialogue among adult learners who are willing and able to proactively communicate via forums above and beyond any official requirement. It is a dialogue which renders learning a gainful intrinsically motivating experience.

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