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Exploring Tutor and Student Experiences in Online Synchronous Learning Environments in the Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT

High levels of student dissatisfaction and attrition persist in blended and online distance learning programmes. As students and tutors become more geographically dispersed with fewer opportunities for face-to-face contact emergent technologies like Online Synchronous Learning Environments (OSLEs) may provide an interactive, connected learning environment. OSLEs, such as Blackboard Collaborate and Adobe Connect, are web-based, computer-mediated communication programs typically using video and audio. This article reports the findings of an exploratory, nine-month study in the performing arts in which tutors used an OSLE for dissertation supervision, pastoral support and performance feedback. Garrison & Anderson's (2003) Community of Inquiry (COI) framework was used as the basis for evaluation of student and tutor experiences to explore in what ways learning could be supported when using the OSLE. Our findings indicate significant benefits of OSLEs including convenience, immediacy of communication and empowerment of learners, even for our rehearsal-based case study. For students, it was important to see and talk with each other (peers and tutors), share and discuss developing ideas and check understanding through the video and audio media. Tutors reported that OSLEs required them to re-think the design of the learning environment, re-visit how they facilitated discourse and re-examine their communication skills especially with regard to feedback on student performance. Technical limitations such as poor quality audio and video, lack of system robustness, and the need for turn-taking did impact on learning; however, it was accepted that OSLE-technology was improving, and rapidly so. Despite the limitations of the study, the evaluation using the COI framework demonstrated that learning had been supported and that use of an OSLE could support all three elements of the framework: social, cognitive and tutor presence. Also, it was apparent that the tutors and most of the students were extremely committed to using the OSLE believing it offered a lively, personal and dynamic learning space.

KEYWORDS

Online Synchronous Learning Environment; Community of Inquiry; Virtual Classroom; Performing Arts

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