

Student perspectives

On the MSc in Digital Education

Christine Sinclair

I've deliberately focused on student perspectives for this talk – which gives it a positive slant, but I do raise some problematic issues as well.

Back in 2006...



I wonder what it's like
to be an online
student?

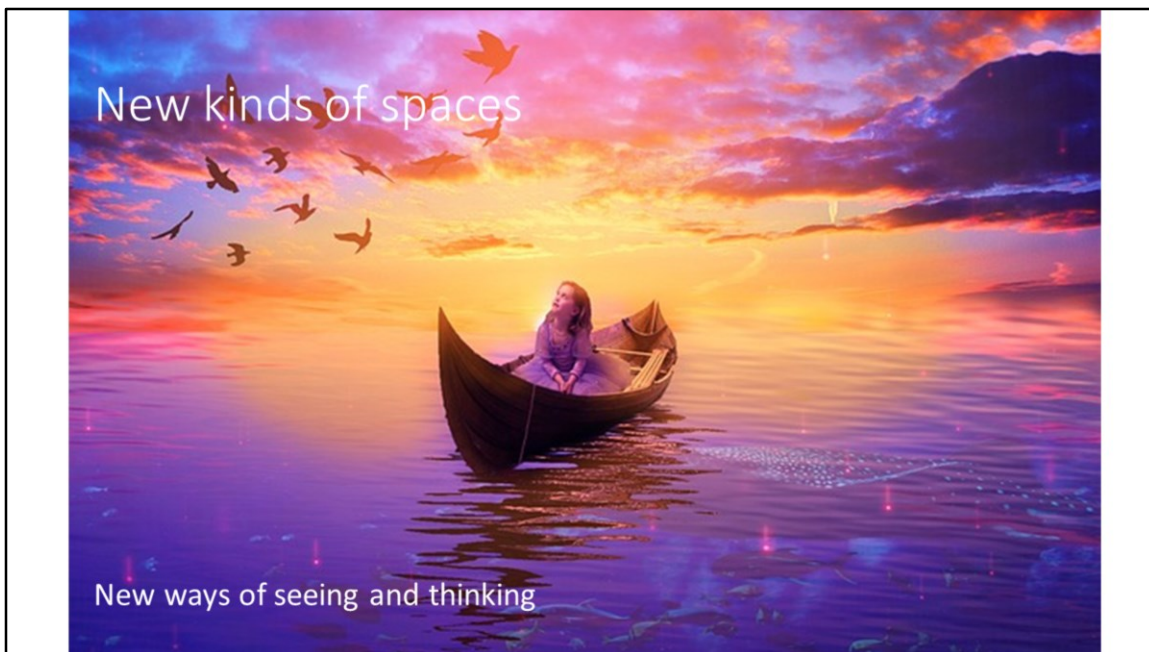
I like to find out about student experience by trying it out.

So I joined the
MSc in E-learning



So I'm a graduate myself from our programme – I didn't expect it to be quite so life-changing. Quite a few people on the team are graduates from the programme. Indeed, quite a lot of people in the University are too, probably including several attendees today.

Most students on the programme were (and still are) part-time in busy full-time jobs. I was an educational developer in the equivalent of IAD, at the University of Strathclyde.



I've been thinking back to what particularly struck me about being a student. I do remember how supportive the tutors were, and how interesting the spaces were. Some of the spaces made me uncomfortable, but that was stimulating too. The courses changed my way of thinking about face-to-face teaching as well as online teaching.

Structured spaces. Remember WebCT?

[Close this window](#)

Compiled Messages

Topic: e-learning	Date: 07 October 2006 16:46
Subject: Agathon's party	Author: Apollodorus

You've been asking me to say something about Agathon's party. I've already been talking about it at great length, see for example: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>. Everyone wants to know about Socrates and he refuses to write anything down. And it was Aristodemus who told me about it so you're getting it third hand. I do like talking about philosophical topics though – but you're maybe more interested in the business applications.

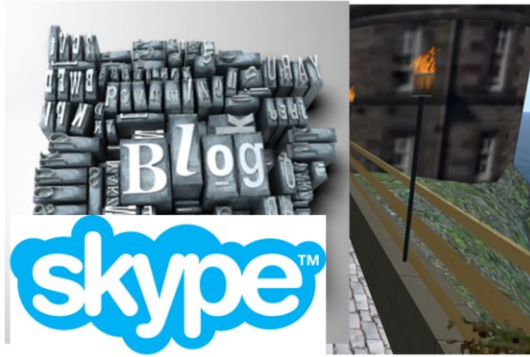
Topic: e-learning	Date: 07 October 2006 16:46
Subject: Agathon's party	Author: Friend

Oh come on Apollodorus, stop teasing me. You've told me about the conversation about Love; now I want to know what they said about e-learning, and especially what Socrates said. Surely Aristodemus wasn't so drunk he slept through it all.

- Example is a parody of WebCT
- (And Plato's *Symposium*)
- My first assignment
- Some structure; a lot of freedom

Our introductory course highlighted the differences between different kinds of space, including the very structured approach of the VLE, which was then WebCT. I don't have any examples from that time, except for my parody, where I mocked up a set of compiled messages about a discussion about e-learning. Undertaking that parody in my WebCT 'playground' gave me some insights into how VLEs enable and constrain practice. The notion of structured spaces and constraints on students was an important one for me.

Volatile spaces



- Private and public
- Synchronous and asynchronous
- Texts, sounds, images, links and **dialogues**

I particularly remember Sian Bayne talking about volatile spaces. I loved some of the spaces I visited, such as the blog which was private between the tutor and student. But I've included blogs as volatile as I did keep a public one too. I realised I preferred asynchronous media to synchronous. Even in the places I was less keen on, it was fascinating how they all changed the nature of the dialogues.

Always, spaces where things happened



- Dialogues
- Explorations
- Tutorials
- Demonstrations
- Experiments
- Graduations

I wasn't that keen on Second Life –I found it a weird space and there were aspects that made uncomfortable. I was fascinated by this.

Ironically, I didn't feel fully part of it until a year or so when I was at the virtual graduation and able to personally congratulate our students who couldn't be in the Usher Hall.

Uncanny experiences, great connections

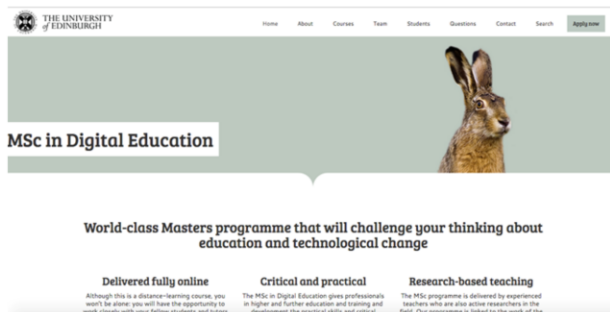


The uncanny moments weren't just in virtual worlds; it was actually rather strange to be graduating with a bunch of people I'd never met before. Meeting tutors in the flesh for the first time was odd too.

I believe that going through these experiences has been helpful for my own teaching on the programme.

What's it like for students now?

- A new title
- A new mascot
- New courses
- New spaces
- Same ethos



<http://digital.education.ed.ac.uk/>

I graduated in 2010 and returned in 2011 as a lecturer in the team. The programme had already changed a lot. I got an MSc in E-learning, which I always thought would have a quaint ring and would disappear, which it did a couple of years after I graduated.

We got a new public website last year, and you can immediately see what it's like for students as their twitter feed goes straight to it. There is also information about our courses, which I'm only going to cover briefly here.

Three exit points

Courses

The MSc programme consists of three core courses and a range of options. You can choose to complete the whole MSc or exit with a Postgraduate Certificate (two courses) or Postgraduate Diploma (five courses). View the [timetable for course delivery](#) here.

Core courses



An Introduction to digital environments for learning

Build a strong foundation for your studies and become familiar with the programme team and our teaching methods.



Dissertation

Design and complete a programme of independent research in an area which is relevant to your own professional and academic interests, supported by your personal supervisor.



Research methods

Build your knowledge of approaches to research in digital education, and plan your dissertation project.

- MSc – all core + 3 options

- Pg Cert – IDEL + 1

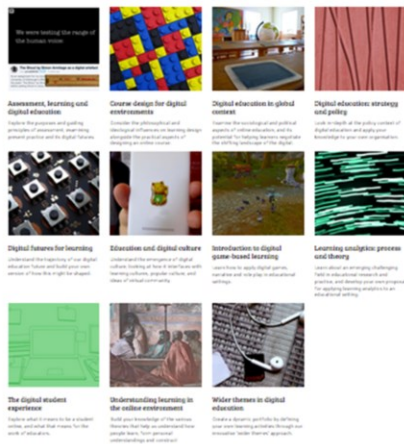
- Pg Dip – IDEL + 4

IDEL = Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning

Students who graduate with an MSc must do our core introductory course and Research Methods, as well as the dissertation. But there are other exit points. It is also possible to take a route for the certificate that results in accreditation with the Higher Education Academy. IAD supports academic staff to take our Introductory course – many have gone on to complete the certificate, including our own Head of School.

Wide range of options

Option Courses

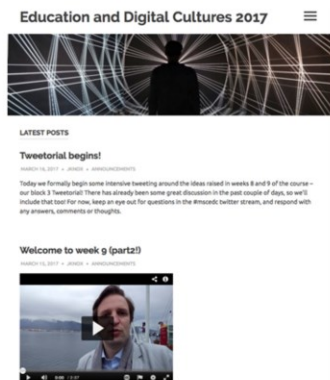


- Not all offered each year
- Opportunity to take 20 credits from other programmes
- Opportunity to come from other programmes

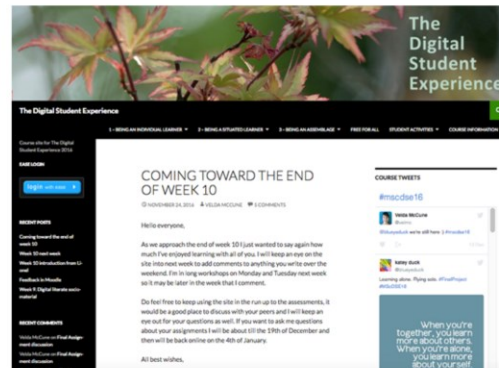
We have a good range of optional courses, including some not available when I was a student. Our latest one, Wider Themes, is student driven – they can propose their own portfolio approach to attaining 20 credits. The range of courses is slightly problematic – some courses attract quite small numbers, but those who want to do them really want to do them. We only had five signed up for Learning Analytics and a couple of them were extremely disappointed that it couldn't run with such a low number. We may have to run this every second year.

Some of our courses are public

<http://edc17.education.ed.ac.uk/>



<http://dse16.education.ed.ac.uk/>



Some courses are not hidden behind Moodle – anyone can check them out, though the EASE login only works for students registered on the course. But it does mean that our practices are visible – an aspect viewed in different ways by different students.

Many courses use Moodle plus other spaces

► Open all ▼ Close all

Instructions: Clicking on the section name will show / hide the section.

1	► Starting off (week 0) - Toggle	Topic 1
2	► Minecraft: playing across all 12 weeks - Toggle	Topic 2
3	► Constructing community (week 1) - Toggle	Topic 3
4	▼ Technology and the teacher (week 2) - Toggle	Topic 4

Tutors: Sian Bayne and Jen Ross



This week is dedicated to a discussion of the relationship between teaching as a profession, and the ways in which it has - or might be - re-worked by technology. The threat - and promise - of the automation of the teacher has been with us for decades now. Although the likelihood of teachers being 'replaced' by robots is very low indeed (see the Frey and Osborne reading in the folder below), aspects of the day-to-day work of teachers are already being automated: plagiarism detection, learning analytics, adaptive learning, automated assessment, and lecture capture are all current and contemporary aspects of the teacher function which now happen through code and computation. This week we will have a conversation about this issue, and hold a critical



MSc Digital Education Minecraft

From Susan Elizabeth Dunnett 5 months ago

This is a simple inside look at the first couple of weeks on our Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning. We have stopped using Second Life now, but explore Minecraft as a potential environment for learning. This has been our first academic year doing this; it has been well received despite various technical issues.

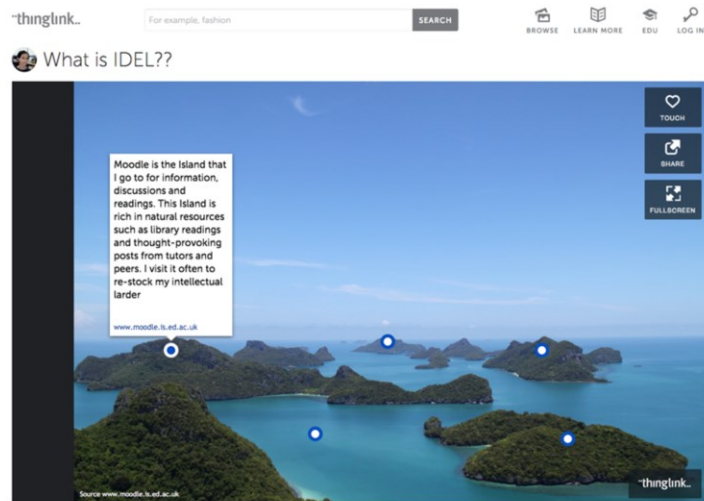
How students see us – metaphors & analogies

- Space(s) and places
- Entries and thresholds
- Maps
- Gardens and growth



In a specific discussion when we are exploring space in relation to pedagogy, we ask students to conceptualise the spaces they have been working in. This generates considerable thoughtful discussion. We have had a huge range of interesting metaphors; exploration of space is naturally popular, but so are other geographical metaphors. There are always some surprises.

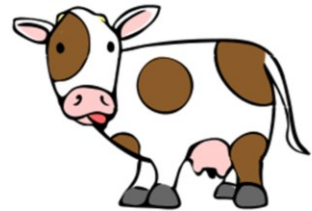
Ruth sees IDEL as an archipelago



I like the image here and it shows the use of Thinglink to make connections that can be taken directly into other spaces. Moodle is just one of the 'islands' that make up IDEL – others are the WordPress blog, Skype, Minecraft and there is even a carrier pigeon (email). This and some other examples highlight the range of activities in the course and their separation from each other, though still allowing 'island hopping'.

An analogy can depend on where you are at the time.

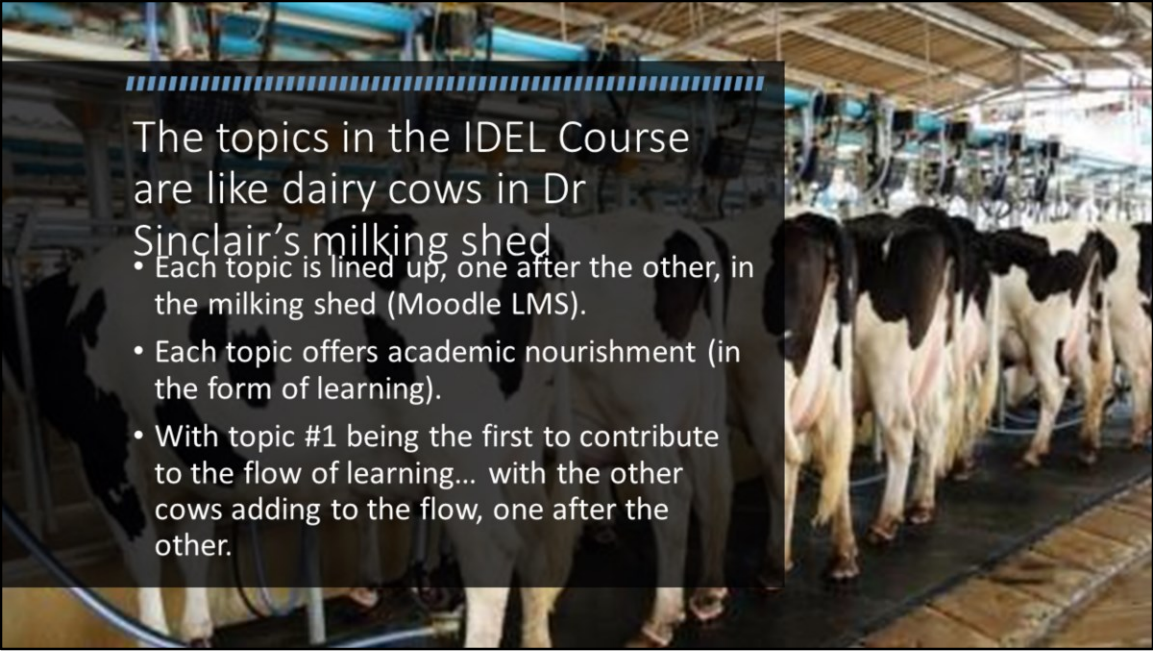
Kym had another inspiration...



Kym happened to be staying in a renovated dairy for a few days, which prompted his idea. I was tempted to show you his whole presentation, but it would take up too much time. It prompted much discussion – it certainly seemed to work well.

I have had permission from Kym and Ruth to use their work here.





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The topics in the IDEL Course
are like dairy cows in Dr
Sinclair's milking shed

- Each topic is lined up, one after the other, in the milking shed (Moodle LMS).
- Each topic offers academic nourishment (in the form of learning).
- With topic #1 being the first to contribute to the flow of learning... with the other cows adding to the flow, one after the other.

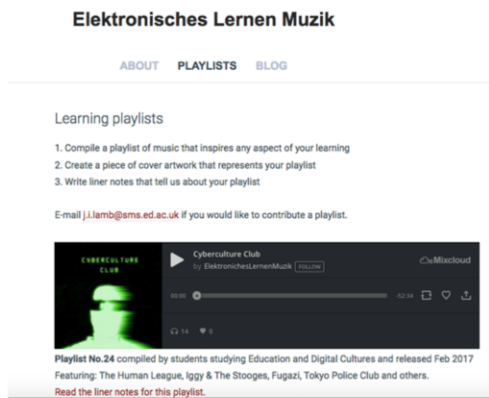
Our students can do great academic work



<http://gameinformedassessment.com/>

There is so much creative work that emerges during our engagement with students. I'm really spoilt for choice but I thought I'd mentioned this dissertation as you can have a look at it. We also have a showcase on our website. Showcasing is double-edged from the student perspective – it can be terrifying to see how good other students are, but for some students it's very important.

They share creative ideas



- An idea that emerged from a group on a course in 2012
- Students share their music playlists for working on the programme
- Feeding back into further discussions on digital education
<http://www.elernenmuzik.net/playlists.html>

I also wanted to highlight that the sharing goes beyond assessment. This fantastic idea has been around for some time now; it's great to see how it has flourished and provided a point of contact across the programme.

They support each other



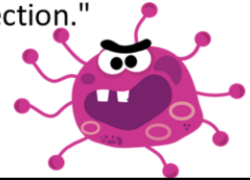
- This personal tutor meeting worked really well.
- Three countries – three students at different stages of the programme.
- New idea – a residential week!

And during a personal tutoring meeting recently, I took a screenshot of our Skype chat and asked if I could use it as an example of communication. The students were in Germany, Australia and Fife and we had an animated and supportive discussion about dissertation work. Some students initiate and sustain such contacts – one recent graduate told us how she and her family had travelled from Ireland to Greece to visit a fellow student.

Some problems for our students

- Funding – especially accessing loans
- Other aspects of life, especially work
- Inappropriate communications from the University

"We are writing to you because you are studying on a course which is also being taken by one of the students who has developed measles. Because measles is a highly infectious disease, you may therefore have been exposed to the measles virus and be at risk of infection."



It's not entirely problem free and I wanted to draw attention (and ask what others think) about these three areas.

We have a particular vexing problem currently – loans are available for students in England, but not for payment by course. It has to be for a full programme, so our ours is ineligible. There are in any case very few loans and grants available for part-time students.

I'm noticing that many of our students are having problems managing the work-life balance and this is affecting their studies. Some are changing jobs, experiencing family problems or illness, having babies, moving – and the University is getting stricter about extensions.

The measles example was funny, but highlights that our students can feel spammed by inappropriate email, and end up not looking at their student email and missing important information. We also had an issue recently with the evaluation email being sent by an unfamiliar person at an inappropriate time.

Teaching and supporting online students

- Consider contexts and needs
- Highlight expectations
- Set challenges
- No such thing as a daft question
- Boast about your students

<http://www.teaching-matters-blog.ed.ac.uk/?p=285>



The measles example would not happen if people are aware of the context of the students. ODL is still considered unusual, and we do understand how hard it is when you're trying to centralise a lot of information for dissemination. I strongly recommend being a distance student to help with these recommendations. I'd like to boast about more of our students than I have done here, but I've just been giving a flavour of the students' perspectives and interests.

Thank you

- Consider contexts and needs
- Highlight expectations
- Set challenges
- Boast about your students
- **No such thing as a daft question**

Christine.Sinclair@ed.ac.uk

I hope that by the time I get here I won't have talked too long as I want to leave time for questions.