Creating Online Community – Challenges and Solutions

“Any teacher that can be replaced by a computer, deserves to be”\(^1\)

1. Introduction
There is an increasing awareness of the special challenges posed by online education (see for example Palloff & Pratt 1999; Salmon 2002, 2004; Beetham & Sharpe 2007). While the number of Internet based courses in higher education has increased steadily over the past decades, it is also becoming increasingly clear that these “new” modes of distribution pose new challenges to instructors, students and learning institutions. For example, several studies have shown that attrition from e-learning is higher than in traditional classroom environments (Carr 2000, Flood 2002, Diaz 2002 and Westerberg & Måråld 2006). While there may be several factors contributing to this tendency, one major cause is arguably that the design of online education often has been based on the same models as traditional courses, according to what Svensson (2004) calls the “you do what you did before approach”; academics see their main role as providing the contents of the course. The result has often been online learning environments that merely offer ready-made educational material to be downloaded, after which the individual is left to pursue his or her studies in relative isolation. The problem with this approach is that it disregards a crucial factor – namely the social dimension of any learning experience. Online students often report feelings of isolation, and feature limited contact with instructors and fellow students. The result of this isolation can be unfinished courses or degrees (Shaw & Polovina, 1999).

The importance of social factors in deciding retention is not a new concept. As early as 1975 Tinto’s Retention model postulated that whether a learner persists or drops out on a course is strongly predicted by that learner’s degree of “academic and social integration”. In an ordinary classroom environment, the social context for learning is something that a lecturer more or less can take for granted. Students make friends and enter networks without the interference of academic staff. Similarly, we can assume that discussions about course content and other academic questions take place outside the classroom, over coffees and snacks. As a lecturer, one is thus only providing one of the influences in the total formula making up the “learning context”. The rest, however, takes care of itself and perhaps because of this, the importance of the social dimension is often underestimated. When the learning is moved to an online environment, however, this is no longer the case. I would strongly argue that it is not enough just to provide learning materials and instructions on how to use them in an online course. We also have to provide the framework for community building in our courses so that “academic and social integration” becomes possible.

There are other good reasons related to quality for the creation of community on online courses. Learning theories based on socio-cultural theories and situated learning (Vygotsky 1978; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) have long claimed that knowledge is constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Similarly, in

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\(^1\) David Thornburg, researcher and e-learning developer
much of the current research into online learning, the social dimension is highlighted as being of primary importance. Palloff & Pratt (1999:5), for example, maintain that the key to the learning processes in online education is “the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created”. Similarly, Deutschmann & Lundmark (2008) were able to show that pass rates in online language courses could be directly correlated with the amount of communication that was going on in the courses. Arguably then, creating a community in the online environment does not only affect retention, but also improves the quality of learning. The present online learning paradigm, so called Computer Supported Collaborative Learning CSCL (Salmon, 2004), has thus involved a shift from passive learning to active student-driven participation, collaboration and dialogue between learners. Within the domain of online language education, in particular, this has become evident. According to Ciekanski & Chanier (2008: 163) there has been a shift trend from computer assisted language learning (CALL) to computer mediated communication (CMC) and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) involving “every language skill and area” in recent years. This is also reflected in the types of software that are being developed for online learning. As Kern & Warschauer (2000:11) put it, technology usage has moved on from software that involve “learners’ interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer”. Online learning is thus being transformed from “silent, solitary acts to lively, meaning-making events rich in discussion” where learning takes place with others in a social context (Bonk & Cunningham 1998:35).

In practice, however, the challenges in creating a collaborative environment for online learning are great. This chapter will describe some practical examples of community building in online learning contexts and discuss the effects of such activities. It draws its data from six years of online courses in English at Mid Sweden University, where I was employed from 2003-2009 and worked with development and implementation of their Internet course program.

2. Background
Mid Sweden University is a small multi-campus university situated in northern Sweden. Due to its rather remote location it has a long tradition of distance learning and an estimated 45 per cent of its students study on distance programs. As a result of dwindling numbers of applicants on traditional distance courses with face-to-face meetings, the subject of English started developing Internet courses in 2004, where the aim was to provide all teaching and communication online. Although the motivation for developing the Internet courses was largely economical, the team that worked hands-on with the development also envisaged that the use of ICT could actually improve communication between the students and between the teachers and students. With this in mind, we built our courses on a collaborative learning model.

Two models, in particular, influenced our design of the courses: Salmon’s Five Stage Model (2004) and Johnson, Johnson, Stanne and Garibaldi’s (1990) Key Element Model cited in Beisenbach-Lucas (2004). Salmon’s (2004) Five Stage Model focuses on both technical and social processes and describes the stages that an on-line learning community goes through, starting with the Access and Motivation stage. During this first stage the participants engage in trying to access the system and the main role of the e-moderator is to welcome and encourage students. The community then moves onto the second stage – Online Socialisation, whereby participants familiarise themselves with each other and their learning environment. It is also here that the social culture of the community starts being established. During the third stage, the Information Exchange, participants begin to explore the range of information available to them and the interaction at this stage concerns the content and sharing of information. During the fourth stage, Knowledge Construction participants start to become involved in active interaction
and knowledge construction, responding and reacting to each other’s input. The final stage in Salmon’s model constitutes the Development stage where learners become more responsible for their own learning and need less support from the e-moderator. Participants are here likely to challenge the content of the course and start constructing their own knowledge.

Salmon’s model is of particular interest since it provides a temporal framework for how an online learning community develops and highlights different aspects that need to be considered during different stages of a course. It thus provides a framework for course design and the role of the teacher, or e-moderator, during the different stages of the course.

Figure 1. The Five Stage Model (Salmon 2004:29)

Johnson, Johnson, Stanne and Garibaldi’s (1990) Key Element Model is more focused on the students’ behaviour and how task design can help to promote certain characteristics deemed as essential key elements for collaborative learning. The list includes:

**Positive interdependence:** Students organize themselves by assuming roles which facilitate their collaboration.

**Promotive interaction:** Students take responsibility for the group’s learning by sharing knowledge as well as questioning and challenging each other.

**Individual accountability:** Each student is held responsible for taking an active part in the group’s activities, completing his/her own designated tasks, and helping other students in their learning.

**Social skills:** Students use leadership skills, including making decisions, developing consensus, building trust, and managing conflicts.

**Self-evaluation:** Students assess individual and collective participation to ensure productive collaboration.

(Beisenbach-Lucas 2004: 157)
These basic key elements were worked into task design (see Section 4 below for more examples and details).

We also had some additional starting points when designing the courses which included: clarity in terms of instructions and design, ease of access to learning materials, engaging courses, the possibility of written and oral modes communication, the creation of a ‘low anxiety’ environment where students would feel free to communicate using informal language, and finally that tasks and written exams would test surface as well as deep structure knowledge. The prerequisites are summarised below in Figure 2.

![Figure 2. Starting points for course design (adapted from Deutschmann et al. 2006:219)](image)

Having given the framework for the course design, I will now go on to give an account of practical examples of community building in the courses.

3. Getting Started – Student Supporting Prospective Students
Starting to study at university level is a big step for many people and doing so in an online environment perhaps even more so. Many studies from traditional campus environments have shown that the use of peer mentors or student “buddy” systems can help reduce anxiety and facilitate the initial integration process (Heffern 2003, DuBois et al 2005; Yorke & Thomas 2003). We tried to apply this model to our programmes.

Mature students, in particular women, are overrepresented in the student community at Mid Sweden University. This category of student often has several other commitments apart from their studies – jobs and families are the most obvious. From questionnaires, it has, for example, been brought to our attention that more than 75 per cent of our students in English have between 50-100 per cent paid commitment apart from their studies. This includes employment and parental leave. In other words, studies often compete with other activities of equal importance.
This may result in high drop-out rates, and that many students never actually get started with their studies.

During the first years of running the courses, we struck by the great discrepancy between the number of students who applied for, and were admitted to, the courses on the one hand, and the number of students who got as far as registering themselves and actually started their studies, on the other. This was especially true for the so-called A-courses, the first term of studies. We were curious as to what was hindering students from fulfilling their initial intentions to study and started enquiring into this question.

There were several issues that came up related to problems in the admission/registration processes. Students found it hard to find the necessary information and often missed necessary parts of the process. In order to understand these, it is necessary first to give a brief outline of what a student has to do in order to join a course at the university.

Prospective students first apply to a course via a national admission database. In this system students can apply to several courses at the same time, ranking these in order of preference (first choice, second choice etc). If a student has the necessary qualifications, and if there is space on a course, s/he is then sent a letter informing her/him that they have been admitted to their different choices. The students then have to respond to these accepting or rejecting their choices. After this initial stage the local university admission board takes over and communicates the lists of students who have accepted their places on a course to the various departments. It is then departments’ responsibility to contact the students with administrative details concerning the course – timetables, course plans, where and when to meet etc. At Mid Sweden University this information is provided on departmental homepages, and letters are sent out to students informing them where to find the information.

The next stage is registration. For online students, this is done via the so-called “student portal”. About two weeks prior to course start, admitted students are sent user IDs and passwords by mail and are then asked to activate their profiles by entering the student portal site. It is also here that they find the online forms for formal registration to the courses that they have been admitted to. Registration can, however, only be done four days before course start at the very earliest. It is only once the student has registered on the course formally that s/he gains access to the first module in the learning management system (LMS) WebCT, which is also available through the student portal. Furthermore, gaining access to the course platform of the English Courses is a two-stage process: firstly, the students gain access to a general Introduction platform. After having completed an introductory assignment, they are then split into groups and given access to the first course module of the programme. In summary then, the process from applying to a course to actually getting started on the same is quite complex and involves several steps. These are summarised below in Figure 3.
In the above process, there are obviously several potential hurdles and students are often daunted by the complexity of the system. After initial enquiries into where the problems lay, two actions were taken to help clarify the process. Firstly, of less interest here, an online site was set up where the students were given an overview of the process as well as specific information and FAQ-lists for each part of the admittance and registration process. Secondly, we decided to use current students as a support resource for students who were in the process of being admitted to the courses. This latter line of action proved very successful and will thus be dealt with in more detail.

In the “Student Supports Student”\(^2\) project we recruited students from our own courses who would then act as peer mentors for new recruits. These students were chosen on the basis of their activity in the courses and included individuals who had been particularly supportive to their fellow students. On a typical course, there are usually one or two students, especially, who take this role of supportive peer. These students become very active in discussion forums helping, others with practical issues related to the course. Our idea was to use this resource more systematically and also to compensate the students for their work. Selected students were thus approached and were then instructed how to support the new recruits.

The student mentors were given contact lists of all the applicants to the courses who had indicated that the English courses were their first, second or third choices of preference. The student mentors were then asked to phone up the applicants on two occasions during the admittance and registration process: The first occasion was early in the process shortly before the applicants had to accept their places on a course. On this first occasion, our student mentors were instructed to answer general queries about the course, such as explaining what tools we used, how the courses were organised, what commitment the courses entailed, what computer facilities the students needed etc. They were also asked to give a brief outline of the registration procedures. The second contact occasion was scheduled for later in the process, shortly before the formal registration (i.e. roughly a week before term start). On this occasion they were to inform the applicants more specifically about the details involved in registering and accessing the learning environment. The student mentors were also asked to note occasions when applicants had decided not to join the course and enquire about reasons for this. Finally, we also asked the

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\(^2\) We are grateful to Forum for Flexible Learning at Mid Sweden University, who initially funded this activity
student mentors to enquire about the applicants’ attitude towards the Student Supports Student project.

The results from this student support activity have been encouraging. Of the approximately 260 applicants that were contacted during the first two terms only one expressed irritation. The rest were positive. Many applicants had wanted to contact the university in order to enquire about details but were uncomfortable about bothering teachers with practicalities. They were thus relieved when they could ask “stupid questions” to a peer. They also appreciated talking to someone who had actually studied on the courses so that they could get a clear idea of content and work load from a student perspective. In other words, students supporting applicants was in many ways more appropriate than teachers doing the same. An additional benefit was that teachers experienced that they received less enquiries regarding practical issues prior to course start, something which had previously been time consuming and taxing.

The most positive result of this activity, however, was observed in the recruitment statistics to the courses. In spring 2007, there were 81 applicants who indicated that the Internet English A course was their first-hand choice. Note here that we do not have access to the statistics concerning how many students had chosen the course as their second or third choice. The same term, 65 students accepted their course places and 64 actually registered on the course. In comparison spring term 2008, only had 68 first-hand applicants. The number of students who actually accepted their places after being approached by the student mentors was, however, 92, which means that many of the applicants who had specified the online English course at Mid Sweden University as their second or third choice, actually went on to choose to study on this course rather than their first-hand choice. Of the 92 students that accepted their places on the course, 88 went on to register spring term 2008. We have observed similar tendencies all the terms that we have been conducting the student mentor system and it is now fully integrated into the course structure. Figure 4 summarises the outcome of the student mentor activity spring 2008 in comparison with spring 2007, when no such support was in place.

Figure 4. Effects of student mentor activity prior to course start spring 2008
4. Fostering Community Building and Collaborative learning through Task Design

On the courses, there are a number of types of tasks with different functions. The overall pedagogical aim, however, is to encourage collaborative learning in the different stages of the courses. To this effect, we have used Johnson et al.’s (1990) Key Element Model as a starting point. Key elements here include interdependence, interaction, accountability, social skills and self evaluation (cf. above section 2).

During the initial stages of a course, tasks are primarily aimed at creating contact. So-called warm-up tasks are used to this effect. This type of task is usually quite ‘easy’ and informal, and tries to cover topics which connect the particular academic subject of the course to the real life experiences of the students. The tasks are formulated in such a way that they should be fun to write and read and there are no strict requirements concerning form or language. Examples of such tasks include the warm-up task of the Grammar course on the A-level – My Past Experiences of Grammar, where students are encouraged to tell each other anecdotes from their school days and the different types of lessons and teachers they have been exposed to. In the Cultural Studies course on the same level, the warm-up task involves discussing stereotypes that the students associate with the United Kingdom and the USA. In the linguistics course on the C-level, a course which deals with various topics of linguistics including semantics, pragmatics and socio-linguistics, the same task involves giving accounts of funny incidents that the students have experienced resulting from mistranslations and other language hitches. The tasks are submitted in public discussion boards and the result is often entertaining reading and adds to process of group building. In this type of task, the main emphasis is thus on the social skills element in the Key Element model above. These tasks can also be seen as adapted for Stage 2, Socialisation processes in Salmon’s Five Stage Model.

Once the course gets under way, the typical task tries to incorporate all the key elements in Johnson et al.’s model and tasks that are adapted for stages 3 and 4, the Information and Knowledge Construction stages, in salmon’s Five Stage Model. In practical terms this entails tasks that include an individual element, a group element (usually involving students reviewing and discussing each other’s work), followed by an individual reflection, where the student evaluates his/her own performance and the feed-back received from others. The aims are to create collaboration, but also individual accountability, joint responsibility and the ability to give and take critique in a constructive manner. In addition, self reflection is an added element in this type of task. The following example illustrates these aspects in more detail:

On the Grammar course of the A-level there are four tasks that operate according to the above model. In one of these tasks, students are asked to work with article usage in English and are asked to decide and motivate/explain the use or non-use of the definite, indefinite or zero articles in a number of example sentences. The point here is that many of the examples do not have single correct answers, and it is thus the explanations that are of real grammatical interest. For example, a sentence such as “He got out of (insert “a”, “the” or the zero article) bed.”, could yield two, arguably three different correct answers, depending on context. Thus the explanation, both in terms of meaning and grammatical structure, is of main interest here.

The first part of this task involves an individual element where the student has to work out the answers and motivations by him/herself (individual accountability). The second stage of the task involves the students posting these solutions in group discussion forums (four members per group) for peer commenting. Important to note here, is that the groups are not predetermined by the teacher, but are decided on the basis of when the students finish the individual element of the
task. No student can join a group without posting their individual task solutions, and groups are filled as students finish this part of the task. In other words, a student will join the group where there is space (i.e. less than four members). As students finish the individual part of the task, more and more groups fill up. The effect of this way of grouping students is that: 1. all members in a group have actually provided their individual input for the group task to proceed, and 2. students are in phase with each other, i.e. efficient students do not have to wait for the input of those that are late, since they will not end up in the same groups. Individual accountability is thus a key element here. In the second phase of the task, the students are then asked to comment the solutions of the other three members of the group, discussing differences and similarities. This part of the task involves the key elements interdependence, accountability and social skills. The students thus have to give and receive critique and are challenged to reflect over their own and other students’ answers. The final part of the task involves a reflective summary of the peer discussion. Students are asked to summarise comments they have made and received and how these affected the view of their original solution. This document is then sent to the teacher and graded. The final part thus involves the key element self evaluation, but also interdependence and accountability since the summary cannot be completed if students do not comment on each other’s work. Excerpt 1 below demonstrates the type of discussions that is generated by the tasks. The example is taken from the Mini Mid Sweden Corpus of Computer Assisted Language Learning (Mini-McCall), a pilot corpus currently being constructed at Mid Sweden University, based on communication from the courses (for more information see Deutschmann, Ådel, Garretson & Walker 2009). The names below have been anonymised.

Excerpt 1:

Hi Elma!
I've read your work and I think you are making it very clear. I just have some thoughts, in 2.e you say that the use of the article "a" is used because it refers to a specific programme. But I think the use of the article in "a very good programme" is because it's not refering to a specific programme, just a programme, and it's mentioned for the first time? I think the same goes for 2.g. where it doesn't refer to a specific house, they just live in "a house" by the sea.
I had some trouble myself with why we don't want to use an article on Italian food in 2.h. Can you help?

Take care!
Sofia

There are also other types of tasks, such as group tasks (students together producing PowerPoint presentations, for example), problem-based tasks and discussion seminars, where different issues are discussed using real time audio. As students get to know each other and ‘open up’, it is interesting to note how much the content of the courses is enriched by the input of the students themselves. This is in line with the predictions of Salmon’s Five Stage Model, where the Development stage (stage 5), involves students becoming more responsible for their own learning and adding to content themselves.

The student groups are often very heterogeneous and the discussions are enriched by the varied personal experiences. In Excerpt 2 below, for example, a student residing in Africa comments on a task in the literature module based on the Chinua Achebe’s Things fall Apart. The task involves discussing differences in social structures between Europeans and Africans as
illustrated in the novel. The student below draws from her experiences in Africa to illustrate this point further with her own experiences:

Excerpt 2:

Socialising in XXXX means visiting your friends, sitting down and leaving after several hours. Marriages take three days. When the great Tabaski feast occurs, I am placed in an impossible situation because I have many friends to visit, but as the guest of honour I cannot leave too early nor arrive too late at the next place, so someone is always bound to feel rejected... Amongst my close friends however, our conversations are never formal, but a typical greeting, whether it be on the phone or in person, always goes as following:

- Sanu, sanu! (hello, hello)
- Ina uni? (How are you)
- Lahia lo! (Very well!)
- Ina gajiya? (How is your tiredness?)
- Ba’ gajiya! (Don’t have any tiredness)
- Ina guida? (how is the family?)
- Lahia lo! (Very well!)”
- Ina aiki? (How is work?)
- Alhamdulai! (God be thanked!) -
- Ina rana? (How is the sun? = How are you coping with the sun?)
- Ina iska? (How are you coping with the wind?)
- Ah, akway iska dayawa! Akway rana dayawa! (Oh, there is a lot of wind! There is a lot of sun!)

By then, you’ve already spent two minutes talking to one another, and since you were just passing, you bid farewell

Other examples of student input enriching the course content include an occasion of oral discussion on gender and language, when a student studying from prison told the rest of his colleagues about male language norms in American prisons. The student in question had spent twelve years in this environment and obviously knew what he was talking about! On another occasion a woman of Indian decent told her fellow students about her experiences from England, and how she was treated depending on what accent she used, Standard English or Indian English, both of which she mastered perfectly. The point here is that collaborative tasks of this nature draw on the knowledge capital of the student body itself so that he students themselves become part of the source of the content adding to subject relevance. This adds to engagement.

5. Teacher Role and Models of Communication
The traditional situation, where teachers act in the role of providers of knowledge through one-way communication is becoming less and less valid. In collaborative models of learning, knowledge is instead negotiated through social processes where people must define their roles, build trust, and identify common goals and expectations (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). The tool used in all these processes is language and the social signals transmitted through this medium arguably constitute the “oil” of the collaborative machinery. The initial communication between teachers and students sets the communicative culture on a course, and we have tried to take this into consideration in our courses.
As mentioned earlier, it is clear that the educator has to be more than a mere source of information. The e-moderator also has an important role in the process of community building. Salmon (2004: 52) lists a number of tasks that an online educator has to deal with apart from lecturing and evaluating work, including many social aspects such as giving encouragement, dealing with insecurities, installing confidence, building bridges for communication, giving guidance about online behaviour, encouraging the sharing of information etc. Especially in the initial stages of a course, the educator’s most important task is arguably to orchestrate the prerequisites for learning, to set the scene for a collaborative learning environment. It is thus reasonable to expect the efforts of the teacher, both in terms of quality and quantity, to be of decisive importance for the future success/failure of a particular course. In an e-learning environment, these efforts are largely manifested linguistically, in the educators’ everyday communication with the students.

Further challenges in this respect are represented by the mode of interaction; communication in the digital environment is often primarily dependent on asynchronous written text. This mode of interaction is lacking in such key elements as intonation, facial expressions, eye contact and body language – social elements of communication that we heavily rely upon (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Such non-referential meaning instead has to be embedded in the written text, leading to a situation that demands special language skills, both in relation to production and interpretation.

Formality is one such linguistic aspect. Formality is generally associated with communicative situations where there is great power difference and/or social distance between the communicators (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). Formal style is, however, very hard to define, even though most native speakers intuitively have a feeling for when something is formal or not. Many researchers, however, make a distinction between formal and informal based on the factor of ‘involvement’, i.e. how language signals distance or closeness between communicators (see Biber 1988 and Heylighen & Dewaele 1999, for example). Given this presupposition, we have tried to create a learning environment that signals involvement rather than formality, and this has been worked into the communicative model.

Another factor related to communication and the teacher role, especially in the early stages of a course before the students have formed a community, is the quantity/frequency of communication. Students often feel insecure and uncertain that they are actually doing what they are supposed to and need reassurance. Waiting a few days before answering queries, without explicitly explaining that you answer mails on certain days of the week, for example, might be devastating and cause unnecessary anxiety and frustration. As the course progresses it is, however, also important to point out that greater responsibility has to be placed on students to communicate with each other instead of relying on the teacher.

In a study of teacher-student communication in the early stages of our online courses (Deutschmann & Lundmark 2008), we explored these two factors – the quantity and quality of teacher communication and the consequences that these variables had on student performance. We were able to show that there was a positive correlation between how active the teacher was in communicating with the students and how active the students were in communicating with each other. Student activity in its turn seemed to affect pass rates; the more active students were in communicating on the courses, the more likely they were to pass. In addition, we were able to show that teachers that used involved language were more successful in creating an active communicative environment. The results suggest that two important factors that affect the level of student activity in the initial stages of an online course include how much the teacher communicates with the class and the manner in which he or she does so. The optimal
prerequisites for an active class seem to be a teacher who communicates frequently with the students and shows involvement through his/her language use.

Synchronous audio communication is introduced on our courses during the second term, as learners become more confident with the technology involved. Synchronous online audio environments deserve a special mention here. One problem with online audio environments is that many of the cues available in ordinary face-to-face communication are missing. As humans we depend on these cues for communication. If, for example, we are met with total silence in a conversation and/or a listener who shows no facial or bodily expression that he or she is listening, chances are that we will stop talking. In an ordinary conversation these interactional cues and supportive moves can be quite subtle—a nod or a smile is often enough. In an on-line situation, however, they have to be more obviously expressed. One way of doing this is through so-called minimal responses—uhu, hmm, okay, yeah, I see and other minimal forms “which encourage a speaker to continue talking” and which “indicate that the listener is paying attention and is interested in hearing more” (Holmes, 1995:56).

In a study (see Deutschmann & Panichi 2009 and Deutschmann et al 2009) based on an Action Research mode of investigation, we investigated the teacher’s role in encouraging active student participation in online oral proficiency classes conducted in the virtual world environment Second Life. Action research represents (see also Figure 5), a “framework for thinking systematically about what happens in social situations, implementing action for change and monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing development” (Hudson, Owen & van Veen 2006:581).

![Figure 5. The moments of action research (from Hudson, Owen & van Veen 2006:581)](image)

Under our research framework the course Oral Competence for Doctoral Students was first conducted in spring 2008, with the ambition to bring doctoral students together in order to practice presenting and discussing their research in English with other post graduates from around the world. When we first started the course we had little experience of this type of course and the results as far as encouraging active oral participation on behalf of the students were quite discouraging. As it turned out, it was mainly the teachers who did the talking and this was obviously not the aim of the course. We then redesigned the course and did a re-run. Special attention was paid to task design, which was made more student focussed and we also evaluated and discussed our roles as teachers in managing and encouraging active oral participation. The results were encouraging: During the first course the students’ contributions represented less than
20 per cent of the floor time, the rest being made up of ‘teacher talk’. On the second course occasion this trend was reversed and the students’ contributions made up roughly 65 per cent of the floor space (see Figure 6. Below)

Figure 6: Floor space taken up by teachers and students during Sessions 1 of courses 1 and 2 (T1-T3 represents teachers, F1-4 represents female students and M1-3 represent male students) (from Deutschman et al. 2009:218.)

The key to managing online conversation included teachers actively signalling interest and managing the conversation through the use of elicitors – comments and questions, which are uttered in order to elicit a response in the dialogue. This type of teacher behaviour could specifically be shown to be important in contributing to student activity. For example, we correlated the number of minimal responses uttered by teachers to the turn lengths produced by the individual students and signalling active listening seemed to have a direct effect on the turn lengths produced by the students (see Table 1 below) . It was also interesting to note that this linguistic behaviour was imitated by the students, who started supporting each other in a similar fashion as the course progressed.
Table 1 Correlation Coefficients Floor time students/responses per minute SL First Session (Deutschmann & Panichi 2009:324)

<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
<th>F4</th>
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<td>1:47</td>
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<td>Supportive moves from Teacher per minute</td>
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<td>6.13</td>
<td>6.36</td>
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<td>3.37</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>3.62</td>
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<td>Supportive moves from Students per minute</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.69</td>
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<td>3.62</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In summary then, communicative models in an online course is something that we should be aware of as educators. Increased teacher awareness of the specific discourse pragmatics of online communication and the importance of facilitating learner interaction via linguistic involvement may lead to greater learner autonomy and initiative within these new learning environments. It may also be important for the teacher to be prepared to change his/her role as the course progresses, taking a less prominent position in the latter stages of a course so that students themselves gain control of their learning situation.

6. Creating Contexts Beyond the Class
One important additional factor affecting student engagement and retention is, according to many studies, students’ involvement with the subject that goes beyond the specific goals of the course, i.e. to create meaning in the learning experience that can be related to the ‘real world’. Language education is no exception and one of the traditional challenges has been to provide meaningful contexts for learning. Few language educators would disagree with the claim that one of the most significant triggers of motivation in learning a foreign language is not an interest in the object itself, the language, but the yearning to communicate via the language. In spite of this, the traditional language classroom is all too often “make-believe”; second language learners are forced into constructed, artificial communicative situations on more or less relevant topics, where they can easily revert to their mother tongue. Consequently, one of the main motivational forces for language learning is not exploited, namely the need and wish to communicate.

In bringing together learners from different language backgrounds, on-line environments can increase the scope for cross-cultural interaction to the extent that the target language becomes the only viable option for meaningful communication. In a language learning setting, this thus becomes an authentic learning situation, an occasion when learners are forced to use their skills in order to make themselves understood. Authenticity is a primary issue mentioned in online task design. According to Hampel (2003:24) “meaningful tasks include “the use of authentic materials and authentic settings”. She goes on to quote Warschauer (1997:487) who “demands” that students be given the opportunity to “conduct actively ‘meaningful tasks and solve meaningful problems in an environment that reflects their own personal interests as well as the multiple purposes to which their knowledge will be put in the future’”

In an online language course setting, there is really nothing stopping us from creating this type of situation; modern e-learning tools offer the possibility to open up the language classroom to a more global arena with relative ease. In a project involving the online courses, we created tasks where students from other universities around the world collaborated with students from Mid Sweden University in mutually beneficial exchanges, and where the students themselves
became part of the source of input for the course content. E-learning tools such as Second Life, Marratech, voice-blogs, wikis and blogs were used to enable this collaboration.

Some examples of tasks included oral presentations aimed at doctoral students (see section 5 above). The meetings were held in the virtual reality world of *Second Life*, which allowed us to simulate a conference environment where the students could present their research in English for other doctoral students situated in various parts of the world. The experiment was appreciated by the students as it was an authentic situation, where they had to use English in order to communicate their research to others with similar interests. In another course, we used so called voice blogs for asynchronous oral discussions in a literature class. We managed to connect our students in a Global Literature class with students from Central Missouri University who were studying a course of African American literature. Both courses included literature of Alice Walker, and students discussed tasks using the voice blog. The asynchronous nature of the tool meant that time differences did not pose a problem. Students could simply record their thoughts at their leisure and then enter the tool later to see what responses they had received. It was exciting to see how the different perspectives of the two student groups led to a more complete understanding of the books they were reading, and the students appreciated the task. A final example from this project includes the use of blog tools for written discussions on various current topics in our Written Proficiency courses. We set up blogs posts on various topics such as immigration, drugs, prostitution, abortion etc, and students from Pisa University, Italy, studying a similar proficiency course were invited to discuss these topics with our students. Again the students thought the tasks were particularly meaningful as they felt that they were using English in an authentic communicative situation. Some of the comments from the evaluation of these projects are listed below:

“I got some really nice input from the Italian Students and it was pretty obvious that we live in different parts of Europe. Our conditions and thoughts differ and the chance to see things from another angel was very interesting.”

“It’s always interesting to be able to discuss issues with people from a different society then your own. It broadens your mind and makes you realise that what we take for granted here in Sweden can be far away from the reality in other countries.”

“I think this collaboration was a really good way of interchange some ideas and opinions. It was really interesting to hear about what they had to say about my topic and how it was like in their country. This project helped me write my essay because I had been given some more background about the topic!”

“I think that the thought of this project was brilliant since it involved the skills in talking and listening as well as in reading.”

“I thought the project was great, I got to try something new which I really enjoyed. Voice blogging, if I can call it that, is fun and quite scary, but very rewarding. Not only do you get to hear yourself talking (good for improving pronunciation!) but you also get to listen to the other student's comments. It made it a lot more personal rather then just reading all the time. And it was great to hear students from Missouri!”

Although rewarding, the challenges involved in building up a meaningful international collaboration should not be underestimated. This type of collaboration often involves taking various cross-institutional variables into account and it is often difficult to match one’s own course content and learning goals with those of the partner universities. Designing learning activities that are meaningful to all involved thus often requires careful planning. As an
Illustration of how this can be done we can use *Avalon Debating*, which was conducted under the EU-financed AVALON project, 2-year multilateral project aimed at testing and developing models for using virtual worlds in language teaching funded under Key Activity 3 (ICT) of the EU EACEA Life Long Learning Programme (LLP).

*Avalon Debating* was offered in the spring semester of 2009 and was lead by instructors under the AVALON project. The course was a collaboration between four universities and had the learning goals addressed rhetorical skills and argumentation techniques. Special care had to be taken to address what Engström (2001, p.133) calls the four central questions of any theory of learning, namely: 1. Who are the learners?, 2. Why do they learn and make the effort, 3. What do they learn, what are the contents and outcomes of learning?, and 4. How do they learn? When designing the course, these questions had to be addressed from the different prerequisites presented by the four distinct educational contexts of the different participants involved. In the planning the learning activities, the educators involved thus all contributed to the content so that it would be relevant for the program of their own student group, while at the same time taking the needs of the other student groups into consideration.

In *Avalon Debating* students came from four separate academic programmes at four universities in England, Sweden, Italy and the U.S.A. The English students were teacher trainees and were attending the course as part of an elective on on-line learning. From these students’ point of view the main interest in the course lay in partaking in an on-line learning event of this nature in order to gain experience and ideas for their future professional lives. The Swedish participants were all students on an Internet English language program. They partook in *Avalon Debating* as part of a ten-week course unit that involved academic presentation and oral proficiency. As such, the Swedish students’ motivation for joining the course thus consisted of practicing oral academic discourse in an authentic setting with native speakers. The Italian students were attending PhD programs and their motivation for participating in *Avalon Debating* was primarily to improve their oral proficiency. An acceptable level of English is a prerequisite for any PhD student within the Italian system. The American students were attending Avalon Debating as part of an electorate composition class on the theme of Cyber Culture and were offered extra credits in their ordinary course if for partaking in the collaboration. In addition, they were encouraged to use the debating topics as starting points for their future compulsory compositions, but did not have to do so if they did not want to. From this student group’s perspective, the course activities under *Avalon Debating* were thus entirely conducted on a voluntary basis.

Given these, in many ways, disparate profiles the course activity had to be designed with the different learner groups in mind. Three main learning objectives were included in the course description:

- **Technical**: Learning to use virtual worlds for learning, both as a tool for communication and a source of information.
- **Social**: To get to know friends from other countries and being able to collaborate with them in an online environment towards a common goal.
- **Academic**: How to present ideas in a convincing manner, looking at issues such as structure, cohesion, presentation techniques etc.

The first of these learning objectives was designed to appeal to the English and American students’ academic interests in particular. Both of these groups had an interest in the digital medium itself and the English students, in particular, also had an interest in how the actual learning processes were affected by the medium. For the Swedish students this objective also
made sense since they were attending an Internet course and *Avalon Debating* represented a new way of approaching e-learning.

The social objective was mainly included as a way of addressing the fourth question in Engström’s list, namely “How they learn?” The course was designed according CSCL-model (Computer Supported Collaborative Learning model – Salmon 2004) and as such it was important to include this in the overall objectives.

The academic objective was included primarily with the Swedish and American students in mind. Both of these students groups were actually studying courses that involved academic presentation. In order to accommodate the English students’ (and American students’) subject interest, the topics chosen for the debate all dealt with matters related to various aspects of Internet culture, subjects which were also of general interest for all the students involved. In summary then, the learning activities in the course were designed baring the different academic objectives of the student’s groups in mind, and thus fits into a design model where each participant’s motivation and objectives are key issues in the design of the collaboration. Figure 7 below gives an illustration of the design involved in *Avalon Debating*.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 7. Avalon Debating in relation to the student groups’ academic programmes*
In summary, all the above activities described in this section can be seen as part of the fifth stage in Salmon’s Five Stage Model, what Salmon refers to as “providing links outside the closed conference”. Arguably, this type of activity fosters learner autonomy and places the learning experience in a greater context.

7. Summary and Conclusions
The examples provided in this chapter illustrates how pedagogical research and models can be translated into practical design of online learning environments. Reflecting over issues such as communication and social aspects in a course and finding ways of incorporating models for these in task design and communicative culture on courses has, in our experience, improved our product. We have managed to retain a front position as provider of online courses in English in Sweden and our retention rates are quite high, comparable to our campus course (between 65-80%). Course development, however, is a never ending process and constant monitoring of what goes on in the learning environments is necessary in order to stay ahead. One of the key factors to our modest success is arguably that we acknowledge pedagogics as a serious science, and that we try to apply it in our everyday activity. We have, over the past few years, not only provided courses, but also studied the same in depth. This model of action learning/research, ie a framework for thinking systematically about what happens in social situations, implementing action for change and monitoring and evaluating the effects of the action with a view to continuing development, is in my view a serious way to approach any learning product. We are, after all, operating in a domain of constant change and development, and what may be a good model today, might be less so tomorrow.
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