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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of First Class conferencing software to create a virtual culture among research students and as a vehicle for supervision and advising. Topics discussed include: computer-mediated communication and research; entry to cyberculture, i.e., research students' induction into the research community; supervision and the Internet, including advantages of computer conferencing; the emergence of professional doctoral programs in Australian universities, specifically the creation of the Ed. D. program at Deakin University (Australia); computer-based supervision at Deakin University using First Class conferencing as the basis for establishing a virtual campus within which students and advisers can interact; conferencing as supervision and the shifts this implies for supervision; the virtual research community, including creating bridges between the local culture and the wider research community; and new directions for universities and changes in the nature of academic work. A figure presents the First Class interface. (DLS)

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EXPERIMENTS IN VIRTUAL SUPERVISION

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication offers the opportunity to teach outside the conventional settings of the classroom, the tutorial or the faculty office. But we know little about the social, linguistic, educational or emotional forms of relationship that are a consequence of virtual teaching. In this paper I will look at the use of First Class conferencing used to create a virtual culture among research students and as a vehicle for supervision/advising.

CMC and research

When personal computers first became available most of us tended to use them as them as superior typewriters. The printer in the room across the corridor never stopped, but now it remains quiet for long periods while we conjure up all kinds of things on our screens; catalogue searches, the directories of distant universities, on-line journals, specialist discussion groups, conferences and discussions, databases, transcripts and multiple conversations.

Perhaps paradoxically, as the marketing arms of universities put their efforts into making each university appear distinctive, for most academic staff the invisible college is becoming increasingly the day-to-day working environment. Much funded research is now inter-institutional and many of us find that we spend more and more of our working lives talking with our research colleagues (wherever they happen to be), and less and less time talking with people down the corridor. The nature of research work, and of the research community, has changed.

As the locus of research and the nature of research work has changed, so too have our working relationships with others. The cell-like nature of research groups, with often intense inside-relationships but only loose connections to wider networks, which characterised the social organisation of research until ten years ago, is increasingly being replaced by virtual communities. The table tennis table, once the centrepiece of most working research units, has almost disappeared. One of our conference areas now has a folder called 'The Gym'.

Entry to cyberculture

It is generally assumed that the training of research students is not just a technical matter but a form of induction, even initiation, into research communities. As the nature of these communities changes, it is obvious that the nature of the training that we provide must change too. Of course these changes are not just driven by the technology but by the need to manage research degree programs in conditions of change. Everywhere numbers are up, students are older, increasingly part-time and are often working in areas with little in the way of an established higher degree tradition (nursing, education, law, studio art, dance, business), not least in the 'new' universities.

Elliott Eisner [Eisner 1979] has talked about a 'null curriculum' (as an addition to the more familiar notions of the 'explicit' and 'hidden' curriculum). He explains the null curriculum as that which is not taught, for in any curriculum selections must be made, and once made this leaves gaps and silences that are usually left invisible to the student. I always found this a difficult concept to grasp, but perhaps the conventional supervisory relationship is an example, for in supervision the curriculum is not obvious. The student is required to make

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sense of the research field by paying attention to some of what is said formally and some of what is said informally, but not all of either. This can be very confusing but progress is only possible when the student is able to see the research field as a gestalt. In practical terms the project may be concerned with investigating a small fragment of the field, but the meaning of the project must be located in a wider understanding of the field as a whole. The significance of much of what is said lies between the lines.

Supervision and the internet

Despite the abstracted nature of research at the level of meaning, for many students and supervisors, supervisory practice is essentially defined by face-to-face contact. (I am using the terms 'supervisor' and 'supervision' as they are the terms most often used in Australia and in Europe, but they carry overtones of authority that are inappropriate. The American term 'adviser' is perhaps better, or the term 'consultant' used in some programs.) Whatever term we choose, 'supervision' is a conversational form, or at least a form of teaching, conceived as dialogue. Putting computers between people seems, at first sight to destroy the very thing that is valued in supervision, the direct contact between people who interact as whole individuals dealing in multiple levels of meaning.

Our experience has been that computer conferencing has some clear advantages:

- at least for the moment it requires us to shift from talk to writing as the main medium of communication. This means that, from the start, students are working in the medium in which they are ultimately tested.
- The written word slows down interaction. Writing is more time consuming than talk, but it can be studied more closely. There is a record of what is said that can be re-read, questioned. referenced, quoted and developed.
- Though time-consuming, the medium frees us from schedules. We do not need to arrange times and places for meeting, worry about being late, disrupt other activities, travel to other sites.
- It is easy to move in and out of conversation - to include references to sources, to point to web pages, to attach documents and tables, even to discuss experiments.
- There is both an intimacy and a distance inherent in the medium. Some of the ambiguities of face to face conversation are ruled out (what to wear, where to sit, when to smile, when to interrupt) and this frees us from those constraints (and opportunities) inherent in social proximity.
- At the same time we need to be aware that it removes some of the checks in conversation that protect areas of intimacy.

Currently we seem to be at an interesting point of conjunction, where the nature of research is changing and where we need to adapt supervision as universal mass education reaches undergraduate education and begins to touch postgraduate programs. The use of computer-based communications appears to offer a rational solution, for it makes expertise more widely available in a situation where the one-to-one. craft-based, apprenticeship notion of supervision has become difficult to sustain. But at the same time, the new communications media are still poorly understood and whether they can sustain
the demands of the supervisory relationship is open to question. They may be less an answer to a problem and more in the nature of a new set of problems. My view is that we need to treat them, not as solutions to the problem of how to teach people how to become researchers, but see them as providing a new set of opportunities for research. Applied to supervision they have the effect of making supervision itself problematic, a suitable topic for research, rather than a merely instrumental means to other ends.

The emergence of professional doctorates

In the early nineties a number of Australian universities began professional doctoral programs in response to a view expressed by the Commonwealth government that the PhD was perhaps not the appropriate qualification for the growing numbers of people enrolling in it. For some universities and for some faculties, especially those lacking a strong research tradition but with strong links into the professions, this was seen as an opportunity to extend the coursework masters degrees that they had recently developed. For others it was a way of building up numbers in the higher degree area by offering extended opportunities for study for the growing numbers who had completed masters degrees but who either did not want to, or were deemed unlikely to succeed in the PhD. [Trigwell, Shannon & Maurizi 1997] For a minority of universities (in Education; Deakin, UTS and Central Queensland University; in Business, the Swinburne Organisational

Dynamics program; in Technology, the Deakin DTech) the development of the professional doctorate was seized, not as a way of extending masters programs, but as an opportunity to reconstrue the nature of the research degree [Brennan & Walker 1994], [Brennan 1997].

In the past ten years the strains within the Education PhD have become increasingly acute for those working in areas like action research, evaluation and curriculum, to the point where many research projects have been distorted to fit the instrumental needs and requirements of the degree. While many people (students, supervisors and examiners) have becoming adept at threading their way through the complexities, the emergence of the professional doctorate provides a new starting point; a means of setting an agenda that puts the needs of new forms of research to the fore rather than finding loopholes through which it could be threaded.

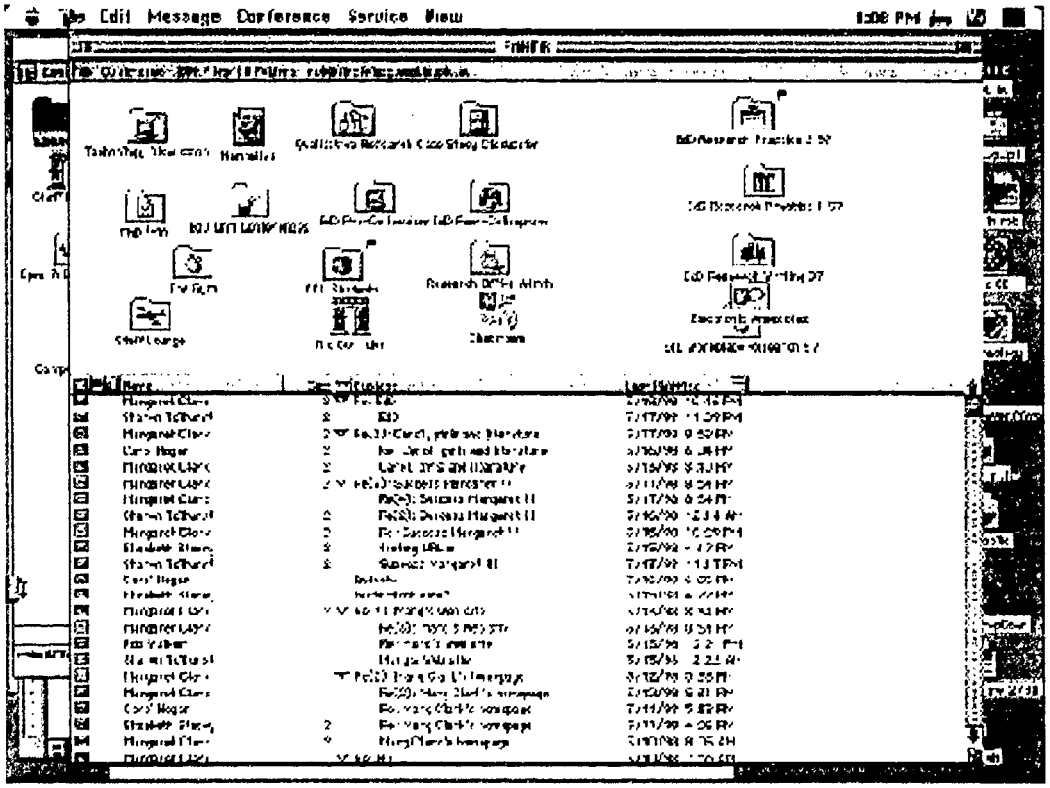
In our creating our EdD program we saw an opportunity to establish the following priorities:

- research projects in and for education (rather than projects that are studies of or about education),
- opportunities for collaborative research work,
- recognition of writing as a central research process (not just the medium of reporting research),
- recognition of audiences for research beyond the academy (the professions, client groups, the press and other media),
- recognition of the problematic role of the researcher within the research project (the demise of conventional notions of objectivity),
- responding to the changing nature of communications and its impact on the nature and practice of research.

None of these shifts are novel and all to some degree touch the work of all research students and their supervisors, but it seemed to us that the cumulative effects of these different shifts was enough to precipitate a structural change. We have responded in a number of ways -- constantly re-writing our courses and revising our procedures and practices, experimenting with new forms of supervision, progress review and assessment and examination. Central to these changes, however, has been our attempts to seize the opportunity created by Deakin's establishment of computer-based
communications as a key resource for distance students.

Computer-based supervision

Since 1995 we have been using First Class conferencing as the basis for establishing a 'virtual campus' within which students and advisers can interact. The First Class conference provides access to a series of discussion areas.



We have tried setting up these folders in different ways. Some contain the discussions for particular tasks and assignments within the EdD program (for instance the folders called, 'Research Practice 1 & 2' and 'Workplace Research'). Other folders allow for discussions around phases of the program (the folders called 'Pre- and Post Colloquium'). Some are topic based and follow topics and ideas that have arisen within other discussions ('Case Study' and 'Hathaway'). Some are intended to be informal ('The corridor') and others formal, ('Staff'). Some are interest based (the folder 'KKU' has been established by a group of EdD students who are based at Khon Khaen University in Thailand).

These conference areas are intended to be 'classroom spaces', at least while we orient ourselves to this space and begin to stretch its pedagogical characteristics, but being a research oriented program we soon found it was important to have a 'corridor'. This was intended not so much as a social space - we wanted to use our entrance 'foyer' for this - but to provide a space where conversation could free-wheel around work topics. Most of what happens in the corridor is serious and productive!

Some might find this all too task focussed and leaving little room for more immediate and social conversation. Perhaps so, but there is an on-line chat function within First Class which some users find meets this need. Though it is sometimes said that e-communications are good for people who already know one another, they can also be a way of getting to know others, and for some are less intimidating than a research seminar or even the cafe.

Conferencing as supervision

My intention here is not to provide a comprehensive description of this software and its functions and capabilities but to indicate the kinds of shifts this implies for supervision. From the start we have tried to make this conference the centre of our program, not simply an adjunct to it. This is the marketplace, the common room, the seminar and the lab. We expect students and supervisors to use it on a regular basis and to treat it as equivalent to walking into the building, indeed we sometimes call the folders 'rooms' (it would be nice if we could do this graphically too instead of being trapped in the iconography of commerce and administration!). So to go into a discussion like the ones on Research Practice we think of as 'going to class'. Here one staff member and a group of students discuss research issues, share papers, submit work for assessment and relate their experiences in attempting to do research in the workplace. There are other

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resources available, students are sent a collection of papers for each 'course', we make extensive use of audio tape and each discussion also has a web page which defines the topic and sets expectations and deadlines.

The differences are that we rarely meet face to face, that discussion is asynchronous, that it is written and semi-public. This may sound straightforward - but it isn't! Just as the word 'classroom' seems at first sight simply to denote a space where teachers talk to students, but where we know that the practice that develops has its own complex dynamic of text and sub-text, explicit curriculum and hidden curriculum, so too there is more happening here than is immediately obvious. First, for all users, finding a voice is problematic. Making an entry is daunting for some people (students and supervisors) since they feel exposed and under scrutiny. Having found a voice, losing it can be difficult. At some time or other most of us have found ourselves becoming 'typecast'; shut in a role that is limiting and finding it difficult to move out of it,

As with email, discussion here is written (and so has a degree of permanency) but is also responsive, so having some of the character of oral interaction. We are all of us still finding our way with this. Some are cautious and considered, others spontaneous and immediate. Every so often it 'works' and we get extended discussions, directly to the point that move our ideas and our thinking along. At other times we circle around one another, missing connections, talking over the ideas of others and missing opportunities. Just like any other classroom.

But, unlike a conventional classroom, what is said here is open to scrutiny and to challenge. Anyone in the program can 'walk-in' to a discussion at any time, they can monitor performance, even see who has been working late at night or early in the morning! Those of us who like working in this space have learnt to be thick skinned about some of these things, we have learnt too to be forgiving of others, especially those just finding their way. 'Flaming', often identified as a feature of listservs, has not been a feature of our discussions to date. Friendships have formed and we have felt our way to a new set of intimacies inherent in the medium (just as we did earlier with the telephone, and before that with letters).

This is hard for those of us with a degree of fluency in writing in our first language. In a second language it is harder, especially given the somewhat telegraphic tendencies inherent in these media, the temptation to in-group joking and plain showing-off. Managing this demands a level of communicative and cultural competence that causes even some native speakers/writers to struggle. For others it may be doubly confusing, and having only the written text to read/write exacerbates the demands for there can be no sudden recourse to laughter to resolve a communicative impasse or a smile toencourage, gender can be invisible or even ambiguous, it may be hard to tell who is a supervisor and who is a student. As with all new media there are potentials here for liberation and for tyranny, for isolation and despair, and particularly confusing is the dissolving of the conventional distinctions between speech and writing.

But, we argue, research itself is primarily an oral culture and, despite many texts assuming that research exists only in the literature, anyone who has participated in a research conference, worked in an active research centre or simply sat around among researchers knows that the process and the products are different. In relation to methods and process most of what the literature has to say is in the nature of fiction, intended to position the researcher as hero, to reconstruct the irrational and implausible in terms of convention. In order to learn to be a researcher one must become a competent member of this virtual village, yet in most research training programs this is left to chance, mediated only through supervisors or a part of the hidden curriculum. What e-conferencing of the kind we have described does is make some of this explicit. So while this may seem daunting to the student (and supervisor), it is in fact making a significant aspect of research culture more accessible than it would be otherwise.

The virtual research community

The problem remains of how to create bridges between the kind of local culture we are attempting to create and the wider research community. One obvious way is through the other resources available to students; the library and the internet, but we have also introduced guest seminars into the conference desktop. During last year we had three outside visitors contribute to discussions on narrative inquiry, on technology issues and on qualitative research. Out of the last of these has developed an experiment in conducting a collaborative memory work project on-line, which we think has not been attempted before.

From the start we have made extensive use of audio taped conversations with researchers, and these have been very successful, being especially popular with students and supervisors who spend a large part of their working day in the car. These do, however, create some problems for those without fluent English for colloquial spoken English can be hard to follow on tape. The ideal solution is to transcribe the tapes and put them on CDROM, so that students can see what is said as well as hearing it and so we can build in links and additional material and provide word search capabilities that make the taped discussion much more useful as a resource. But transcripts are expensive to produce, the CD format a little less accessible and the time that would be needed to produce such resources difficult to justify for small numbers of students. 'Guest appearances' on the conference may be a possible solution.

These ideas for development also point to other possibilities for collaboration. Producing a set of CDROM based discussions would be expensive for us to do for no more than a hundred students. But if we shared the task around other institutions and we each produced a CD for perhaps 500 students, then the economics of development might begin to add up. The current climate of competition between universities (or at least between their vice-chancellors and presidents) puts some barriers in the way, but not ones that are impossible to squeeze past.

New headings

We are all well aware that universities are headed in new directions and that the nature of academic work is changing in ways over which we appear to have little control. For some time we have tried to manage increasing demands within conventional frames, but it is clear now that these frames can no longer contain the demands that we make on them. As academics we are daily forced to rethink the nature and purpose of the research that we do, the forms in which we publish and the ways in which we construct our careers in terms of the changing functions and purposes of the university.

The supervisory relationship is perhaps the last structure to break, for it has been hedged around with myth and privilege and kept largely hidden from the change process. We now see this changing as the pressures for change become too hard to resist and as the new communications opportunities appear to be offering alternatives to the one-to-one, face-to-face armchair/laboratory bench notion of supervision.

We have sketched out some of the ways we have been trying to make these changes in the context of a professional degree. We are still at the beginning in doing this, but we see potentials in it. Being involved in it gives us some grip on the process, rather than just responding to economic and other pressures we are able to see that some things work better than others and work to steer the process in those directions.

Students who are not native speakers of English may encounter special problems, problems we have scarcely addressed because at the moment everything is new to us, but centrally these are problems of language, culture and communication. We have argued that the world of research is changing, and changing not just in what it does, but how. Computer mediated communication, not long ago an obscure enthusiasm among a group of nuclear physicists, is transforming research in the humanities, social sciences and professions. In supervising research students we have to take them into this world because this is where the action will be in the future. This shift is not just a technical shift but requires people to relate and communicate in new ways. Language issues lie at the centre of this change.

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