

University of New England

National Teaching Development Project 1996: *Collaborative Learning Groups in Distance Education*

Final Report

**Dr Darryl Dymock
Mr Peter Hobson
Associate: Mr Sam Meredith**

ABSTRACT

Using audioconferencing, Collaborative Learning Groups (CLGs) were established among distance education students enrolled in three education units at the University of New England in 1996. The purpose of the CLGs was to help overcome the sense of isolation many distance education students feel, and to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning through discussion with other students without the presence of the lecturer. In general, students who participated felt their learning was enhanced, but there was still quite a strong desire expressed for the lecturer to be part of the discussions.

SUMMARY

In 1996, the authors established what they called 'Collaborative Learning Groups' (CLGs) in order to address two particular educational issues for students studying by distance education:

- i) the lack of opportunity for many distance learners to interact with each other on a regular basis
- ii) the need to encourage higher education students to become more self-directed in their learning.

It was decided that these issues could be addressed by establishing telephone discussion groups which did not directly involve the lecturer. This was the major objective of the project.

While 'tele tutorials' are common in distance education, the aim of this project was to encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Audio conferencing was chosen because of the ready availability and ease of use of the telephone. Additionally, in Semester Two, a 'voicemail' option was introduced in order to supplement the CLGs. Groups were established in geographically proximate areas where possible, in three semester-length 'units' of study in education. There was a total of 187 students enrolled in the three units. Participation in the CLGs was voluntary.

An initial audioconference was organised for each group at which the lecturer in charge of the unit of study clarified the expectations and process. Each group then had the opportunity to 'meet' by audioconference at a pre-arranged time, three times during the semester, with discussion facilitated by a volunteer 'coordinator' from among the students, with additional guidance through voicemail in Semester Two. Discussion was based on the printed material and audiotapes developed for the units as part of the normal study package for UNE distance education students. The conferencing facility available at the university meant that the maximum number in any CLG was eight.

Coordinators reported back to the lecturers after each of the CLGs, and in semester two the lecturers provided voicemail messages in response, which could be accessed by individual students at their convenience.

Overall, there was generally strong support for the *principle* of collaborative learning, and most students who took part indicated that they thought their learning had been enhanced, but there was also a need expressed by some students for continuing lecturer involvement in the process. Groups that met as planned over the semester generally reported enthusiastically on the experience, particularly in terms of the social interaction and peer support. Other groups indicated that they started off well at the first session, but that subsequent arrangements to meet broke down, or that they felt the need for the lecturer's input. One of the key features of a successful CLG seems to be that the group has at least one enthusiastic and energetic member (usually the volunteer coordinator) who ensures that the group persists. There also appears to be a need to schedule meetings so that the members of the group see them as a priority amongst the competing demands of occupational and domestic responsibilities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CLG PROJECT

Objectives:

The objectives of the Collaborative Learning Groups project were:

More effective learning:

- (i) To break down the isolation experienced by distance learners
- (ii) To encourage students to become more self-directed in their learning
- (iii) To develop students' awareness of the benefits of collaborative approaches to learning
- (iv) To develop deeper learning
- (v) To develop a sense of shared concerns and problem-solving
- (vi) To increase students' sense of satisfaction with the learning experience

More effective teaching:

- (vii) To determine to what extent teaching material sent to distance education students was sufficient to encourage meaningful discussion within Collaborative Learning Groups without lecturer involvement and, in Second Semester, to supplement the CLGs with Voicemail support from the lecturers.

The students

In Semester One, 81 undergraduate students enrolled in an undergraduate Education unit ESCC 211/311 were given the opportunity to participate in the CLGs; in Semester Two, 85 students enrolled in a postgraduate Education unit, EDCO 491, along with a further group of twenty-one 3rd and 4th year level undergraduate students in ESCC 312/412, were invited to participate.

Groups were selected where possible on the basis of geographical proximity, with a maximum of eight in each because of the limitation of the conferencing facility used.

In first semester, approximately 55% of the total number of students enrolled were from Sydney, 33% from country NSW and ACT, 12% from Qld and one from Victoria. In second semester, 30% were from Sydney, 42% from rural NSW, 16% from Victoria, 2% from Tasmania and 10% from Queensland.

The process

Students were informed of their learning groups, a rationale and instructions on how to make the best use of the telephone conferencing in the printed material they received on enrolment. A copy of the CLG information sent in Semester One is attached as Appendix 1. It was made clear that participation in the groups was optional. A range of relevant issues and topics for them to discuss was suggested and the relation of these to the overall aims and content of the unit was made clear in this material.

An initial audioconference for each group was organised early in the semester with the lecturer present. This audioconference was arranged through Telstra's Conference link facility, whereby the Telstra operator rang each person in the group, using the group lists provided by the lecturer. This session was used to provide the initial group meeting, to clarify the expectations and process for CLGs, to appoint a volunteer coordinator for each group, and to plan dates for the subsequent teleconferences when the lecturer was not present. Students were encouraged to exchange brief biographies and photographs to aid the "getting to know you" process.

Each group then had the opportunity to 'meet' by audioconference at a pre-arranged time, three or five times during the semester, depending on the unit being studied, with discussion facilitated by the volunteer 'coordinator' from among the students. The main differences between these audioconferences and the initial one were that:

- a) the students took responsibility for making the conference calls at the times pre-arranged by their group
- b) the lecturer did not participate in the groups' discussions.

Discussion was based on the printed material and audiotapes developed for the units as part of the normal study package for UNE distance education students. In semester two a voicemail facility became available at UNE which could be accessed by individual students at their convenience and was used to provide further lecturer guidance to the CLGs. In the undergraduate unit, five voice mail messages were linked to five CLGs and provided topics for discussion at the next CLG, as well as lecturer's comments on topics set for the previous CLG. (Copy of memo attached as Appendix 2. This memo includes material used in the first semester memo plus additional voice mail information.) In the postgraduate unit, a voicemail message was provided in response to issues raised by the co-ordinator on behalf of the various groups after each CLG.

Evaluation

Evaluation took place through a survey at the end of each semester of all students enrolled in the three units, using questionnaires, whether or not they participated in the CLGs or Voicemail. The number of responses out of the total number enrolled was as follows:

ESCC 211/311: 26/81 (32%)
Of those who responded, 17 took part in at least one CLG
EDCO 491 42/85 (49%)
Of those who responded, 26 took part in at least one CLG
ESCC 312/412 8/21 (38%)
Of those who responded, 6 took part in at least one CLG

Overall, 76 out of a possible 187 students responded to the survey, of whom 49 (64%) took part in at least one CLG. For the sake of brevity, only a small number of responses are included in this report. Fuller details will be provided in a proposed journal article.

The responses to the three options provided for the question, 'Did the CLGs enhance your learning', are shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Extent of learning enhancement through CLGs

	ESCC 211/311 (Sem 1) Total 17	EDCO 491 (Sem 2) Total 26	ESCC 312/412 (Sem 2)	TOTAL No. %
In a significant way	7	6	3	16 33
In some way/minor way	9	16	3	28 57
Very little/not at all	1	4		5 10

Strengths and weaknesses of the CLGs for all three units included the following responses, listed in order of frequency of mention:

Strengths:

- Contact with other students (15)
- Intellectual support (6)
- Moral support (4)
- Greater depth of learning (3)

Weaknesses:

- Need for more lecturer involvement (13)
- Need for more student organisation (4)
- Need for more student participation (4)
- Need for more preparation time/logistics (3)

A number of students suggested telephone tutorials with a lecturer present would be preferable to CLGs.

Asked whether they would be prepared to pay if necessary to participate in a CLG, 75% of the 52 students who responded to that question said they would be prepared to pay the costs themselves.

General comments on the value of CLGs

Below is a sample of the range of individual comments from students about the perceived value of CLGs:

- *Good way to get your thoughts together. Would like a lecturer there to keep us on track but otherwise it was good to have contact with others. External study is lonely'*
- *It was fantastic, helped 'pace' my study, helped develop **better** responses to assignments, allowed cross fertilisation of ideas and experiences, fulfilled a greater depth of learning'*
- *Our group was unusual because it acted as a catalyst to bring the four [name of country town] students together (we met at one place'*
- *Really added to my experience as a new external student and helped me feel as if I belonged.*
- *Whilst enormously beneficial for overcoming study isolation our group didn't actually discuss the theories /ideas etc as in-depth as I would have liked'*
- *Each group was only as good as the best person in that group -only way around this is to have a co-ordinator who could ask people to do specific tasks and report back'*

- *Not enough students with knowledge were in my group. As a co-ordinator I contacted everyone in our group at least once. It was discouraging when they did not phone into the session.'*
 - *Students would benefit from a more structured conference, topics predetermined*
- While the CLGs were good for talking to someone else about the unit, they were a bit like the blind leading the blind...They just didn't help!*
- *Our group fell apart'.*

Voicemail.

Voicemail was available only from Semester Two, so responses came from the survey of students in EDCO 491 and from two surveys of students in ESCC 312/412. Sixty students from a possible 106 responded (57%). Of these 60, 33 (55%) listened to one or more of the Voicemail messages. Most students who did not take part thought the existing materials were adequate.

In response to the question, 'Was Voicemail support helpful?', the students said:

Very helpful: 14
 Some help: 18
 No help: 1

From the 33 students who used Voicemail, there was agreement that this facility:

- *reassured them about the general direction of their studies : (26)*
- *reduced the isolation they experienced while studying alone: (24)*
- *they liked hearing their teacher's voice: (24)*
- *messages provided valuable feedback and background for CLG sessions: (23)*
- * messages covered the problems they experienced: (22)*
- *they liked being able to get support at times that suited them : (21)*
- *helped preparation for the unit's assignments: (22)*
- *messages were helpful independent of their role in relation to CLGs: (21)*

Individual comments included:

The messages were easy to follow
The messages were too fast given the content
I would like to be able to ask a question'
I would like other areas of help included (eg. assignments) '
P. has an engaging presentation style;tuning in to Voicemail was like tuning in to the next episode of a radio serial. I looked forward to it.'
I endorse the use of the system in other subjects.

Comments on the **combination** of Voicemail and CLGs included:

Could become a vital aspect of Distance Ed
Good system with more UNE experience/development'
Messages on tape would be equally effective. Voicemail without CLGs would be very ordinary.';
't was an interesting experience but not very enlightening.

Some students commented favourably on the audiotapes provided in the first semester ESCC unit, even though there was no question about these. A few students suggested email contact with lecturers as a useful substitute for Voicemail support.

Conclusions

- (i) The major benefit of this program was seen to be in countering the isolation of distance study.
- (ii) While valuing the moral and intellectual support of others, a significant number of students wanted more contact with teaching staff. Some students accepted responsibility for deficiencies in their groups' functioning.
- (iii) A significant majority of students indicated they would be prepared to pay the telephone costs themselves in order to participate.
- (iv) Several students said that the quality of participation was the key to the benefit derived from the CLGs, although only one directly mentioned deeper learning as an outcome.
- (v) Many students regarded the sharing of ideas as second only to moral support as the major benefit of those groups which operated effectively.
- (vi) Most students indicated that the contact with others was beneficial.

Overall, most students participated and appreciated the opportunity to interact with others. Few students made specific mention of a greater depth of learning as an outcome of the project, but most felt it had enhanced their learning in some way.

Recommendations to others

- 1) Collaborative learning groups can be a valuable teaching tool in countering the isolation felt by distance education students. The basic requirement is access to a touchtone telephone.
- 2) Outcomes of CLGs in terms of more self-directed and deeper learning appear to depend on the extent of students' willingness to get involved, to share ideas with other students, and to take responsibility for their own learning. Substantial effort is needed to break down students' long-standing inhibitions about self-directed and collaborative learning and over-reliance on lecturer leadership in all facets of their learning experience. It may take more than one semester or one such experience to do this. The initial advice to students is vital in helping them see the merits of such a new way of approaching their learning. It should be recognised that even students with a deep learning approach and the best of intentions may not take part in voluntary CLGs if they cannot fit in such a commitment into their already busy lives.
- 3) There is a need for careful lecturer structuring of the CLG program and setting of tasks, with regular feedback to students. Voicemail provides a very useful way of achieving the latter. The initial Conferlink session organised by the lecturer is essential in establishing the groundwork for subsequent group meetings.
- 4) It is important to have strong student co-ordinators (but even that does not guarantee a group will continue). There is a need for careful briefing of coordinators by the lecturer in advance and regular collaboration during semester.
- 5) CLGs and Voicemail should be seen as adjuncts to the more traditional modes of distance education, not as a self-sufficient replacement.
- 6) Lecturers who use CLGs and voicemail need to be aware of the considerable extra time and effort involved.

Acknowledgments

The Project Team would like to acknowledge the assistance of:

a) The Project Reference Group, particularly for the suggestions they made for improving the initial information sent to students about the CLGs:

Project reference group:

Dr Diane Thompson,	Deakin University
Dr Judy MacCallum	Murdoch University
Mr Terry Brown	University of New England
Mr Edward Reid-Smith	Wagga Wagga (External student, UNE).

b) Lynne Chapman and Kim Guthrie at the University of New England for their assistance with Voicemail.

Dissemination

This report will be sent to the UltiBase website. The authors are presenting a seminar on the project at the University of New England in August 1997, and are preparing an article for *Distance Education*, an international refereed journal.

The value of the grant

With regard to the ongoing support for teaching and learning development at universities, the Project Team believes that National Teaching Development Grants are vital for the encouragement of innovative practice, and particularly urges support for projects such as this which utilise readily available low-level technology.

Darryl Dymock
Peter Hobson

June 1997