Enhancing the Reading Student Experience through Virtual Communication Tools (VCT)

University Teaching Fellow Project – Interim Report – Year 1
Professor Rachel McCrindle

Introduction
Virtual communication tools (VCTs), such as email, skype (chat/voice/video), Twitter and Facebook are widely used by students for University work alongside more traditional face-to-face contact. Using them effectively is also increasingly important when students go on placement or enter the graduate workplace.

Initial Aim
The initial aim of this project was to conduct a number of comparative studies to investigate the extent to which students use different VCTs in their areas of academic and wider life, for what purposes, in what contexts, and their preferences for different styles of communication. The results of the study would then be analysed to identify key communication trends, preferences, barriers and opportunities related to the general student population at Reading as well as specific demographic groups within it including cross-culture/disciplines/disabilities/ gender/international. Based on this analysis recommendations will be made as to whether changes or enhancements to VCT usage could be realized in order to maximize the Reading student experience and further enhance teaching effectiveness.

Refinement of Aim
In addition to the desk-based research conducted, as a starting point for this project students on the SE1SE11 Software Engineering Module were asked, as part of their assessment, to develop a communication plan that would assist them to work together to complete a significant piece of work running across the Autumn and Spring terms.

Whilst one key goal of the work they undertake is to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the subject being taught, an equally important goal is for the students to develop their softer skills, and in particular those related to communication and team work. A cohort of students may typically have a mix of degree disciplines, gender, culture, age, special education needs and physical disabilities. Whilst some students naturally find group work and communication easy and intuitive, others find it a highly challenging and uncomfortable process. Use of appropriate communication strategies aided by VCTs, if used appropriately, can significantly enhance the student’s group working experience and effectiveness.

Although communication plans have been developed in previous years for this module, the plans this year were analysed more closely with regards to the ways in which the students ‘naturally’ chose to communicate. Overwhelmingly the student’s preferred method of choice was through Facebook and GoogleDocs/DropBox alongside the more traditional email and mobile numbers, with a minority also electing to use Skype. This led me to consider that perhaps a more beneficial approach to my UTF project would be to target it more specifically at ways in which VCT’s can assist group work communication.

Discussions with employers (as well as press articles) confirm the value of students being able to work effectively in teams even (especially) when things to not necessarily go smoothly or to plan. Whilst these
‘mal-functioning’ teams provide valuable lessons – we still wish to improve the student group work experience.

These findings coupled with analysis of the student critiques from previous years regarding what they had learnt from undertaking the project and their experiences of working as a team, as well as my, and other staff experiences, of using team work with groups of students in the later years of their degree courses, not only consolidated this more specific aim with regards to VCTs, but also widened the project to consider more generally how to make group work more enjoyable, effective, inclusive and fair, especially when teams encountering students who do not pull their weight or who for other reasons find group work difficult; thereby incorporating in the project elements which may not just be related to VCTs.

**New Title**
Enhancing the Reading Student Team Work Experience through Virtual Communication Tools (VCT) and other Strategies

**Activities, Achievements, Challenges**
The shift in focus of the project has had an impact on the specific activities undertaken in 2012-13 as well as a shift in the practical timeline of the project towards years 2 and 3; however in doing this I believe that it has also strengthened the potential outcomes of the project whilst maintaining the original specific objectives but with more targeted application. This shift also meant that the allocated budget was not required for 2012-13 as no additional staffing or resources were required to undertake the work. The key activities undertaken include:

- Desk based research on VCTs and Horizon reports (extended to include team/group work)
- Consideration of evaluation strategy and impact assessment strategy in light of amended focus
- Preparation and administration of questionnaires for students completing SE1SE11 (these pilot questionnaires will be used in an enhanced form as a basis for subsequent years and cohorts of students)
- Discussion with industry regarding the value of team work experience/skills
- Selection of student cohorts/staff to participate in the study for Year-2 of UTF project
- Preparation of initial material for more detailed survey of students with regards to their use of VCTs and attitudes to group work (to be administered pre and post group work) for each year of study
- Contribution of experiences/material to presentation (Reducing the Trauma of Group Work in Part 1 - Good Practise Benefits All) given by Liz Victor at T&L showcase on ‘Inclusive Practice in T&L and Assessment’ exploring examples of how the needs of those with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties can be incorporated within standard teaching arrangements.
- Presentation of reviewed full paper on ‘Educational Inclusiveness through Ludic Engagement and Digital Creativity’ at HCI International 2013, July 21-26th Las Vegas, Nevada, USA.

**Plans for 2013-14**

- Further analysis of student feedback on team work experiences and VCT communication methods (positive and negative) occurring across the past 8 years to identify trends/consistent problems
- Preparation of questionnaire material for detailed survey across students participating in team work across all years of SSE – extending pilot questionnaire from Year 1 above.
- Administration and analysis of questionnaire material for detailed survey across students participating in team work across all years of SSE
• Setting-up and running of a series of focus groups/individual interviews as appropriate across year groups and specific groups (e.g. international students, students with specific learning needs) about their experiences of working in teams and how VCTs aid/deter communication. Discussions also to be held with staff and employers.

• Qualitative and quantitative analysis of findings from questionnaires with special emphasis placed on assessing trends and (anonymised) results based on culture/ internationalisation/ disciplines/ disabilities/gender/age etc.

• Reporting and dissemination of findings – internally and externally

• Organisation and running of a day-long national Workshop on Effective Team Working (applying for HEA supported – but not dependent on receiving it)

• Planning expansion of findings/survey etc. to other Schools/Universities for Year 3 of the project.

**Budget 2013-14**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>£</th>
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<tr>
<td>Employment of part-time facilitator/RA (possibility PhD student) to organise, run and transcribe focus groups and one-to-one interviews; assist with analysis of data; assist with organising and running national workshop on Effective Team Work (including VCTs)</td>
<td>7,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student involvement/ focus group incentives/ refreshments etc.</td>
<td>1,000</td>
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<td>Contribution towards attending conferences to disseminate findings (remaining cost from my SDA/teaching fund)</td>
<td>570</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to running of national workshop (plus HEA money or contribution from other source)</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>£11,070</td>
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