

Introduction to the Asynchronous Learning Networks Mini-Track

Starr Roxanne Hiltz and
Information Systems Department
New Jersey Center for Pervasive Information
Technology
New Jersey Institute of Technology
Newark, NJ 07102
hiltz@adm.njit.edu

Jerry Fjermestad
School of Management
Center for Pervasive Information Technology
New Jersey Institute of Technology
Newark NJ 07102
Fjermestad@adm.njit.edu

Last year's introduction to the papers in the ALN minitrack noted: "Among the issues not touched on in this group of papers is how specific characteristics of the technology used may improve or detract from ALN effectiveness and influence the roles played. For instance, what system features are especially helpful to support a rich online discussion and team work?"

The first set of papers for this year begins to look at some of the issues of what kinds of software features may be useful to support collaborative learning online. There are now several commercial "packages" to support online courses, but many researchers and teachers find them lacking in some way; these three teams built their own software to support ALN.

For example, at the University of Hamburg in Germany, "CommSy" or "Community System" was designed to support project teams in their coursework projects. As in many ALN courses, the Information Systems department at Hamburg encourages students to work in teams on complex problems for an extended period of time. In such project based learning, one of the requirements was that "the software supports the flexible handling of a variety of information sources and of intermediate results from the project work." These and other requirements for coordination as well as team communication did not seem to be met by "off the shelf" software available currently. They describe the functional scope of CommSy

The other two software systems described in this session of the mini-track, designed and used by groups at the University of Nebraska and in Rio de Janeiro, have much the same aim. They are meant to provide a comprehensive set of tools to support cooperative learning and "teamwork," not just to support things like the presentation of lecture type materials by an instructor, or class discussions. All sets of authors feel that their software met important pedagogical needs. What is missing at this point is empirical evidence to answer questions about exactly what forms such software support for collaborative teams should take; what features have what effects?

The second set of papers represents a diverse set of methods for looking at questions of the effectiveness of online learning for different types of tools, media, and learners. In England, qualitative methods were used in an "action research" mode to study the use video clips and voice annotations, in addition to the usual text medium of ALN. They were found to help practitioners' descriptions to be grounded in the reality of their actions. It was also found that the use of video clips and voice annotations enabled the subjects to see their colleagues and this was valued by them all for helping create a sense of social presence. A team from Florida International University reports on a project to identify a set of factors that measure the value of online learning, and used structured interviews to gather the values of students enrolled in ALN courses. Finally, data on a large scale project at NJIT use quantitative data from student surveys and course grades, to look for possible moderators of the effects of ALN on students.