Electronic Classroom, Electronic Community:
Virtual Social Networks and Student Learning.

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Lisa Harris
B. SocSc

School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning
Portfolio of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
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Declaration by the Candidate

I, Lisa Harris, declare that:

a) except where due acknowledgement has been made, this work is that of myself alone;

b) this work has not been submitted previously, in whole or part, to qualify for any other academic award;

c) the content of the thesis is the result of work that has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program;

d) any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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Date:
Published Works Derived from this Research

Refereed Conference papers:

2003  “Turning space into place: a community of online learners seek mutual support in a familiar environment of their own making.” 20th annual conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE), Adelaide, Australia, University of South Australia.

2002  with McPherson and Nunes, “It is an inertia thing, no-one uses it, so no-one uses it: the failure of a virtual social space (VSS) intended to create a learning community” 19th Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE), Auckland, New Zealand, UNITEC Institute of Technology.

Refereed Journal Articles:


Book Chapters:

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Abstract

The capacity for online learning environments to provide quality learning experiences for students has been the focus of much speculation and debate in the higher education sector from the late 1990s to the present day. In this area, ‘quality’ has become synonymous with engaging students in a learning community. This study reports on a qualitative research project designed to explore the significance of community for students when they study in online learning environments.

This project used three case studies to explore tertiary students’ thoughts and expectations about community in the online environment. The research was constructed iteratively. Data from the initial case suggested the need to explore the relationship between the constructed online learning environment and the development of learning communities or what I have termed Social Learning Support Networks (SLSN). To explore this issue further, the project was expanded and subsequent cases were chosen that included fundamentally different types of online learning environments.

The project had two significant results. Firstly, students not only confirmed popular educational theories on the value of learning communities, but also described how this form of social connection might practically benefit their learning. Secondly, the project found that certain forms of synchronous online environments provided enhanced opportunities for students to form social connections that supported their learning.

This project provides new evidence of the benefit of community for students studying online and argues that future online learning environments should be shaped by five key principles designed to foster a sense of social connection between students.
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Introduction: What is the significance of community for tertiary students studying online?

The growth in Internet use across the world has seen this communication medium permeate many aspects of our day-to-day lives. The Internet has become so common in our society that it is now unusual to see a press advertisement for a product without also seeing a world-wide-web or email address accompanying it. As Castells suggested in 1996 ‘A technological revolution, centred around information technologies, is reshaping, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society’ (1996, p 1). It is clear that few aspects of our personal, public, community or commercial lives have been left untouched by this technology. As the digital economy has grown, many industries and organisations in the Australian economy have re-examined their business practices in the light of the challenges and opportunities provided by the expansion of this new communication medium.

Australian universities have been swept up in these changes and have actively sought to exploit the perceived opportunities provided by the development of the so-called ‘click and mortar’ university of the future. As a teacher at RMIT University in the late 1990’s I too found myself swept up in these changes. In 1999 I was asked to teach the online offering of an undergraduate social science course. It became obvious to me that while it was relatively easy to translate the direct course content into the online environment, the social aspect of a student’s learning experience was not easily catered for in the design and delivery of the course. In discussions with instructional designers and fellow academics developing other online courses it seemed there was a clear focus on course content. There was a general awareness of the importance of
being clear about how a student might engage with the material and what they needed to do with it. However, we were not thinking about how students might engage with each other or how the online environment we were creating might either promote or inhibit the social interactions of students. We were not thinking about the development of learning communities or how these might enhance students’ learning. Based on my on-campus experience as both a student and teacher, this seemed to be a problem.

This led me to explore the literature relating to the quality of online courses, how quality was measured and what was seen as best practice. Inevitably this line of enquiry included the discussions, prevalent at the time, about the nature and possibility of disembodied learning. These discussions mirrored earlier debates in the literature about virtual communities online, their nature, quality, and the inevitable comparisons with face-to-face or so-called ‘real communities’. Beckett (1998) for example warned the shift into the online environment was running the risk of ‘shooting higher education in the foot’, arguing that in losing the classroom dynamic between students we were at risk of losing the very ‘Eros of learning’. Despite Beckett’s and others (Brabazon 2002) concerns, the online learning industry appeared to be growing at an alarming rate based on the promise of increased access for those students not able to physically attend a university and the added bonus of increasing a university’s income through the growth in student numbers.

The promise of ‘learn anywhere, anytime’ education has often been a cornerstone in the argument for growth in online courses. This flexible form of delivery seemed to also offer a new way of meeting the increasing demand for life long learning (Bell et
al 2002). The growth in the use of the online medium for course delivery (or supporting on-campus courses) has been significant in recent years. Over 90,000 units of study were being offered by Australian universities in 2001 (Bell et al. 2002, p. 17) and it is now a common requirement in many Australian universities for there to be some form of web-based support for each course.

For teaching and technical staff alike this rapid growth provided both technical and pedagogical challenges and many authors started to question the quality of courses offered in the online environment (Beckett 1998; Brown and Johnson-Shull 2000; Cole 2000; Correy 2000). From my own experiences of teaching I suspected the quality of online courses were not just dependant on the materials put online, but also had something to do with understanding how students interacted with each other and how their interactions supported each other in their learning. In the literature these interactions or sense of connection began to be described as ‘community’ (Palloff and Pratt 2001). I also suspected that the actual design of the online environment students encountered might affect these interactions or the formation of ‘community’. A clear question for this project emerged. This research examines the significance of community for students enrolled in courses that were wholly or partially delivered online, and the role the constructed environment played in the development of their social interactions.

I imagine all Ph.D theses are a journey for young researchers, as they engage with the literature, discuss their thoughts with their supervisors and colleagues, attend conferences, and generally piece together a sense of where the field stands and which

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1 Throughout this thesis the term Course will refer to a single unit or subject of study; a Program will refer to a collection of courses constituting a graduate or postgraduate program.
questions remain to be explored. If this is the case, then this Ph.D is typical of most. The importance of this journey (and the people one meets) is that it happens over time and usually in many different locations or spaces. Hence the researcher gets time and space to integrate the comments and thoughts into their project and often lots of further opportunities to clarify the implications of these ideas. From experience in this project it is often the unexpected, unplanned meetings with people that provide the most food for thought. This observation has some relevance to the research question at hand because analysis of the case studies in this project revealed a strong relationship between the development of connections between students, the spaces they engaged with, the people they met and the time they took to journey through their studies. I’ll discuss this in more detail later, but I shall ask the reader’s indulgence now to recount one such encounter that significantly shaped the development and design of this research.

In the early months of this project, prior to interviewing any students, an old family friend died and I travelled to Queensland - some 2,000km from where I live - to attend the funeral of a well known and loved academic from one of Australia’s most prestigious universities. After the funeral (over cucumber sandwiches in the family home) I found myself amongst a significant number of cardigans and fountain pens. A fellow postgraduate student had warned me of the importance of preparing a two-minute answer to that dinner table conversation stopper, ‘So what is your Ph.D about?’ So, when one the academics asked about my topic (after having just commented that last time he saw me I hadn’t learnt to walk yet, let alone contribute anything useful to the world), I felt confident I could respond. After providing my two
minute prepared response, my fellow academic huffed and from under a furrowed brow he responded

‘Load of poppy cock, students aren’t part of a community on-campus, why should they be part of one online! Students are here to learn, get their degree and get out, not to socialise!’

I found myself blinking like a rabbit in a spotlight, and stuttering ‘Well there is evidence from Tinto in the US that...’ only to be cut off mid sentence by him retorting

‘Yes but that is America, everything is different here, universities are different here. I think you will find you are barking up the wrong tree. Say hello to your father for me.’

And with that he turned back to the table of wilting sandwiches. While feeling a little deflated, I had to admit he had raised a significant point. Was I just going along with some trend in the literature that was relevant in the U.S. but had little relationship to student life for commuter-based universities? My experience as both a student and a teacher made me think this idea of community was important but his responses did make me question ‘why’ and I started to question what assumptions were informing my research.

As I shall discuss in the literature review, numerous authors have written conference papers and journal articles detailing their experiences of creating community for their online students. Others, such as Palloff and Pratt (1999), have provided really useful and practical advice for the development of community in online learning environments. However, there is little evidence of students staking claims for the significance of community for themselves. It was clear I had also made a series of assumptions about the ‘good’ of community for students in formulating the research
question and exploring these assumptions should become part of the project. Questioning these assumptions made me reflect on student life at Australian University campuses. Did students on campus feel part of a community or at least feel there was some value to developing connections with each other? Was ‘community’ even the right word - or, drawing on Bauman’s (2001) work on face-to-face community - was the rise of ‘community’ in the online learning literature just some ‘longing for’ or ‘romanticisation’ of a long-past ideal campus experience for students? Did current day students see a link between their social connection with each other and their study?

From these reflections I developed the following five questions as a framework to explore the significance of community for students online:

1. Did students think community was important to them?
2. Had students experienced this sense of community in either the face-to-face environment or in an online learning environment?
3. How did they believe community developed in the learning environment?
4. Did students believe these social networks supported their learning processes and if so, how?

Following the analysis of the data from the first case the fifth question was added:

5. What role did the constructed online environment play in facilitating the development of these social networks?

The importance of exploring the significance of community for students studying online extends beyond an intellectual exercise of understanding human behaviour or wanting students to have warm fuzzy feelings about their years at university. It is
about exploring what may well prove to be a significant factor in the quality and
effectiveness of online learning. From a student’s perspective, understanding how
community forms and how it may actually improve a student’s learning will make a
valuable contribution to several areas; the growing body of literature concerned with
the issues of teaching quality; the future development of online courses and online
learning environments; the professional development for academic staff delivering
online courses; and the growing concerns about high levels of student attrition in
totally online courses.

As I shall discuss, the literature on teaching quality in the online environment is fairly
unanimous in focusing on student interaction as one of the main measures of quality.
More and better student-to-student and student-to-lecturer interaction is one of the
yardsticks by which to measure the 'quality' of courses delivered online (Palloff and
Pratt, 2001). Although this flows on from the general adoption of constructivist
pedagogies by those interested in educational research, it is reasonable to argue that
the almost universal use of lectures and tutorials in most Australian universities is
evidence of the gulf between educational theory and education practice. Many
teachers have found themselves caught in this gulf when they venture into the online
world and find their teaching practice and the design of their courses is open to peer
scrutiny in ways their on-campus teaching is not. I experienced this first hand when
working with a project team RMIT University provided to support the strategic
development of specific programs. As a team we often found ourselves being asked to
do things or demonstrate properties within the new online courses that had never been
required of us in our on-campus courses. For example, things like constructing student
profiles, demonstrating the alignment of course aims, objectives and assessments, and
explicitly detailing how students were to engage with the material and each other. These measures were all excellent means of trying to ensure the courses we were developing reflected best practice as detailed in the literature, but in the late 1990s these measures were rarely applied to the development of new on-campus courses. There was something fundamentally different about the online environment that meant that simply providing materials to students in written form, rather than speaking it in a lecture, and asking them to email an assignment, did not constitute a ‘good’ learning environment.

Many of my colleagues opted out of this project arguing that it required too much of them and it was incompatible with their normal teaching practice, i.e. write a series of lectures, deliver them, be available for questions from students and mark their assignments. In a sense, what was being asked of them was to explicitly understand the learning process in a way that had not been required of them on-campus. In an on-campus environment, students interact with each other both inside and outside the classroom. The physical space of the campus and them being on it, in effect, provides the environment for them to make connections with each other, which they may later call upon to support their learning. As Cole (2000, p. x) has argued, the students’ physical interactions on-campus creates ‘the social milieu of dialogue [which] provides an opportunity for interaction amid a socio-cultural, political matrix in which new and unforeseen possibilities emerge’. However, much of this is both invisible to teaching staff and beyond the influence of their course design. I argue that the focus on student interaction and the development of community in the online learning literature is an attempt to build these factors into the design of online courses rather than the online environment students inhabit. Some describe this gap between current
on-campus teaching practice and online course design, very positively - an opportunity for those teaching on-campus to rethink traditional pedagogies (Department of Education 2003). For others such as Zemsky and Massy (2004) it is a critical factor in the failure of some online programs to deliver both the flexibility and growth promised. This research is designed to explore, from a student’s perspective, what happens outside of the interactions designed within the teacher controlled learning environment of the course. This is not to suggest that the design of both online and on-campus courses should not follow sound pedagogical principles. However, in looking back to the on-campus experiences of students we may unlock something about how students interact with each other that is far more powerful in fostering a good learning environment than trying to build their interactions and the development of community solely within the course design.

These questions about the quality and effectiveness of online learning environments also have some very practical implications for the Australian higher education sector. It is clear that some of the issues confronting higher education providers such as retention and drop out rates (Farquharson 2007) are also causes for concern for those who offer courses online. Carr (2000) acknowledges that while most universities choose not to make these figures publicly available, some educators in the U.S. have reported drop out rates in online courses as high as 50%. While it is reasonable to point out that students choosing to study online are probably already at higher risk of dropping out because they are often part-time or mature age, I would argue it is even more important to provide these students with learning environments that support and foster the development of peer-support networks and a sense of being part of a community of learners.
In the literature, the idea of creating learning communities or communities of learners is strongly linked to the concept of providing quality education. Many contemporary distance learning theorists and researchers suggest that it is critically important for online learners to become part of a community of practice (Lowry et al 2000). Commitment to the idea that community is important in the learning process is also represented in the literature related to undergraduate students studying on-campus. Tinto (2000), for example, provides persuasive evidence that the formation of learning communities benefits students in both their social and academic development. Australian research (Correy 2000) suggests that most undergraduate students still want an 'on campus' experience, and this would seem to suggest that they want to 'go to university'. Why is this? What is it about attending a physical campus that is important to them? Are they staking some claim for the importance of the connections they will make with each other outside of the classroom? Is it possible that feeling part of a community of learners is something that extends beyond a student’s experiences in the classroom? This project steps outside of the electronic ‘classroom’ to explore students’ experiences beyond the designed learning environment. Understanding how community is formed and how students use these relationships to support their learning is likely to change the current emphasis on relying solely on what the teacher designs to develop community. The quality of the designed learning experience will always be significant for the quality of the student experience. However this is so variable between colleagues and across institutions that it is worth exploring what factors outside of this might affect how students create a sense of connection with each other.
Findings from the initial case study provided an insight into the role of the physical campus in the development of social connections between students and how informal relationships often became the corner-stone students called on for support in their learning. The capacity for students to just ‘bump into each other’ in the non-learning or social spaces on a campus (cafes, corridors, library, etc.) provided many of them with the opportunity to develop acquaintanceships. These acquaintanceships went on to become the connections students called upon to support their studies both inside and outside the classroom. Rather than continue to use the more nebulous term ‘community’ I identified these connections as Social Learning Support Networks (SLSN) to emphasize the connection between these social relationships and their value in the learning process. Students identified the development of these SLSN’s as crucial in supporting their learning. However, for students studying online there are no corridors, no places outside the classroom – how do they develop these kinds of networks.

While there have been substantial contributions in the literature providing advice for educators about how they can foster the development of learning communities or SLSN’s within their online ‘classroom’, there has been little research into the role of the constructed environment in facilitating the development of SLSN’s in either online or on-campus educational settings. This caused me to question the use and design of Course Management Systems (CMS) prevalent in many Australian universities and the effective lack of an equivalent of the ‘campus’ in most tertiary online learning environments. In essence I wanted to explore if the constructed environment in which online courses operated, played a role in supporting students’ social interactions and the development of SLSN’s. To do this I needed to explore
students’ experiences of different constructed online learning environments. I used a multiple-case study approach to explore three different online environments. The first case used a rudimentary web page with email communication and discussion boards. The second, a purpose built Virtual Social Space operating within a course management system (WebCT). The third, a text based virtual campus operating in a MOO environment (Multi user dimensions-Object-Oriented).

My first case study took a group of undergraduate social science students who were studying a single course online as part of a three-year on-campus program offered by the School of Social Science and Planning, RMIT University Melbourne, Australia². The online environment in which these students were studying was extremely primitive, and provided little or no opportunity for the participating students to develop a sense of connection with each other. Students’ interactions were teacher driven and focused on course content and assessment activities.

The second case study was a Masters in Information Technology Management program offered from Sheffield University, England. The academics responsible for this program decided to develop a Virtual Social Space (VSS) to act as an umbrella social space running across courses and throughout the program. Students in this program already displayed a high level of non-content related social discussions within the discussion boards provided in each course module. It was expected that students would use the VSS to further develop these social relationships. However, to the surprise of all concerned, after initial use of this environment, few students returned and no ongoing social contact occurred via the site.

² It has subsequently become the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning.
The third case study was a group of students studying an undergraduate, context curriculum course offered by the School of Psychology, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. These context curriculum courses are offered to students from other faculties in order to provide them with an extra-discipline experience. As such, the students are from a wide variety of faculties and disciplines. This course operated within a text based virtual environment of a MOO (Multi user dimensions-Object-Oriented). Further details of this course and the nature of the constructed online environment will be provided later. This environment, however, provided students with a virtual environment that attempted to replicate a campus.

I will argue that each of these case studies confirmed that students - both undergraduate and postgraduate - believed that the development of social connections with their student peers supported their learning. Most significantly, each of these cases demonstrated that where possible, students attempted to make social connections with each other for the purpose of developing Social Learning Support Networks. How these connections were formed, and the extent to which the online learning environment fostered them, was determined by a number of factors related to the construction of the online environment. Principally, they are the richness of the constructed online environment and the opportunities that environment provided students to engage with each other, on their own terms, and at a time of their choosing.

As I will discuss in chapter 1, Tinto’s (2000) work on the value of creating learning communities for on-campus students provided the theoretical foundation for my
development of the concept of Social Learning Support Networks. Tinto’s work is widely cited by those interested in issues of student engagement and first year retention, and underpins many of the authors who advocate the development of learning communities for students studying online. In addition, Burbules’ (2000) discussion on the nature of ‘space’ becoming ‘place’ was used as a framework to understand the possibility of creating community in online learning environments and to explore the presence and interactions of students in the various online learning spaces represented in the three cases.
Chapter 1: Literature Review - definitions and debates

The plague of academic research historically has been its failure to inform practice (Robinson, 1998). Whether research in teaching and learning has been misunderstood, refuted, or simply ignored, the result at the dawn of the new millennium is a mismatch between what we know and what we do. (Brown and Johnson-Shull 2000)

Brown and Johnson-Shull’s idea that there is a mismatch between what we know and what we do is as true today for online learning as it is for on-campus university education. The idea that the dominant mode of teaching found in most Australian universities is still the 18<sup>th</sup> Century model of lectures and tutorials flies in the face of the last seventy years of research into effective adult learning. The introduction of online learning environments offered some opportunity for reflection and change but the reality for most students who enrol in an online course in Australia, is that they are likely to encounter an electronic form of this model - a series of text-based lectures with some discussion boards into which they can make a contribution. Zemsky and Massy (2004) have argued that we will not see a significant improvement in online education until there is improvement in the quality of on-campus learning. Tagg (2003) has argued that real change in the way we teach at university will require as much structural change in the way we fund and allocate resources for courses and programs, as it will a staff development epiphany on the value of focusing on good learning. While I agree with Tagg, there is still much to understand about what constitutes a good learning environment. How can I, as a teacher, ensure my students
have the best opportunity to reach their potential? How will the introduction of new technologies alter my current practice or require new ones? Although this project has a clear focus of exploring community online from a student’s perspective, the focus on community is really about what will support a student to learn well. The heart of this project is to understand which elements of an online environment foster good human relationships and support learning; to understand the implications for learning when we offer students courses online and; how they respond or adapt to these changes in order to succeed. This required me to explore what we know about face-to-face pedagogy, the implications of teaching in an online environment, and the design implications for online environments that are to be used for teaching and learning. While the literature is agreed on the idea of developing a sense of community for students, it is less clear on why, pedagogically, this is important. There is also little research into the design implications for online learning environments (such as Course Management Systems), for a form of community that extends beyond the walls of a single course. In order to really understand these issues it was important to have a theoretical overview of on-campus education and how students form and use social networks to support their learning in face-to-face university life. I start this chapter by exploring the pedagogical approach that underpins the formulation of good quality learning in face-to-face environments, and then explore the implications for online learning and the design of online learning environments. Finally, I will focus on the idea of community, how do we understand what community is in the face-to-face environment, and how is it relevant in a learning context both online and on-campus.
Learning

This project examined the significance of community for students enrolled in courses that were wholly or partially delivered online, and the role the constructed environment played in the development of their social interactions. In practice, for many Australian academics creating an ‘online course’ has meant copying the text or PowerPoint slides of their lectures into a unit in the course management system (CMS) provided by their university. In some cases this has included adding a few discussion boards for students to make contributions that can be read by the class. Although understandable, this ‘teacher centred’ approach is based on a series of assumptions about how we teach in higher education, what we expect students to do and how students learn. This approach re-enforces the prevailing on-campus teaching methods that suggest learning is somehow a magical result of teaching, and that learning really only happens in a classroom (and generally in front of a lecturer!). This is despite a wealth of educational literature on how students learn, how they support each other on-campus, and what type of physical environments provide the best opportunities for students to develop networks. Current teaching practice certainly does not acknowledge that learning, for most students, is a process that is not so much about ‘what the teacher does’ but is ‘about what the student does’ (Shuell cited in Biggs 1999). More importantly, in regards to this project, *practice* in both the face-to-face learning environment and the online learning environment has little reference to community, the need to create community or the possible benefits for students of feeling they belong to a community.

This was in contrast to the literature designed to assist educators in creating quality online courses. Authors in this area have provided advice on how to create a sense of
community amongst students - albeit often with little evidence, justification or pedagogical explanation as to why this might be of benefit. This raised an interesting question for me as a researcher and educator about how the findings from academic research into teaching and learning largely failed to inform practice in the tertiary sector. Before asking students for their thoughts on the significance of community, I needed to understand what educational theory underpinned the almost universal adoption of this concept of 'community' by online educational theorists. If this idea of community was so important in theory, why wasn’t it a focus in on-campus teaching practice? In developing this research it became important to unpack these ideas of community and learning. To understand how social relationships might technically support learning and to make some sense of how students might develop these for themselves on-campus. In essence it was important to find out what we (as educators) have forgotten or what has just never made it over the divide from educational research into educational practice.

A constructivist approach

Significant contributors on tertiary teaching and learning such as Ramsden (1992) and Biggs (1999, p. 12) propose a constructivist approach to learning to inform their teaching and learning models. Biggs suggests constructivism provides a learning theory framework that ‘aid[s] reflection [and is] a theory of learning that is broad-based and empirically sound, and that easily translates into practice’. While there is no single agreed upon definition of constructivism (Grabe and Grabe 2001), Wheatley provides one of the most cited and eloquent accounts of constructivism:
A constructivist believes that knowledge is not disembodied but is intimately related to the action and experience of a learner – it is always contextual and never separated from the knower. To know is to act. To know is to understand *in a certain manner*, a manner which can be shared by others who join with you to form a community of understanding. (Wheatley 1991, p. 10)

Constructivist approaches stress the need for dialogue between students as they reflect and contextualise their understanding of an issue. Within this context of a ‘learning community’ the proponents of the social constructivist approach to learning suggest that it is the ‘trust’ engendered within the group environment that provides students with the opportunity to risk their perceptions, reflect upon and realign their understandings of an issue through dialogue (Lowry et al 2000). Much of the relevant educational literature suggests that trust is developed within the context and application of group discussions using verbal and non-verbal social cues. A clearer understanding of social constructivism reveals that this understanding of education incorporates the environment (including the activities, the space and the actors within it) into the learning process.

**Social Constructivism**

There has been a plethora of constructivist learning theories developed, with new adaptations presented in the literature each year representing a continued focus on active learning environments by the most eminent writers on learning (Laurillard 2006). However, most of these newer theories build on, or are influenced by, one of
the four core constructivist theories. These core constructivist theories are information processing constructivism, trivial constructivism, radical constructivism and social constructivism (See Ernest 1994 for a detailed synopsis of each of these theories). Of the foundational constructivist learning theorists, Piaget’s work is arguably the most well known and certainly his complex theory of learning provided a fundamental shift into a constructivist approach.

**Piaget**

Piaget’s theories of learning are complex and a full account of his theories is beyond the scope of this project. However, I will broadly outline his main concepts because other constructivist theories build upon some of the operational concepts he developed and these operational concepts are relevant to the learning processes supported within learning communities. Much of Piaget’s research involved understanding how children learn and he suggested that there are a series of qualitatively different stages that a learner passes through. Although he suggested these stages where not age dependent, he did believe that a learner passed through them in a linear fashion. These stages (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational) represent a child’s shifting cognitive development from an infant, whose sense of the world is rooted in present action, to that of a young adult who can conceptualise abstract and hypothetical situations (Schunk 2000, p. 235).

More important to the later development of other forms of constructivism, was Piaget’s understanding of the developmental mechanism at work in the learning process. Piaget’s concept of ‘equilibration’ (the idea that biologically we strive to create equilibrium between our own cognitive structures or understandings and the
external environment) and his understanding of how peer groups facilitate the learning process, has underpinned later constructivist educational design concepts such as scaffolding and collaborative group work (Lisi 2002). An example of equilibration would be the following: we think we know or understand something, then some event occurs or we receive some external stimulus which does not concur with our understanding or knowledge, and we therefore seek to correct that imbalance or ‘cognitive conflict’ via some process.

Although Piaget’s work has been criticized on many grounds and some parts of his theories have not been supported by later research (Schunk 2000), his ideas have become so fundamental to our understanding of how learning occurs they have lead some authors to suggest ‘it is arguable that the influence of Piagetian ideas has pervaded all educational practice, especially in our ideas about the logical sequencing of intellectual development in courses’ (Evans and Nation 1989, p. 250). The father of modern social constructivism, Vygotsky, while born in the same year as Piaget (1896), did not influence western educational theory until the later decades of the 20th century - some fifty years after his death. In recent decades, his work has been translated and published, and his theory of social constructivism has become a dominant theoretical perspective in the field of education. It is also the theory of learning adopted by this project to understand and analyse the significance of community, and the role of the constructed environment in tertiary online learning environments.
Vygotsky

From the literature reviewed for this project it is not possible to say that Vygotsky (who originally graduated with a law degree from Moscow University in 1917) developed his theory of learning by building on Piaget’s work. He may have had access to some of Piaget’s work, but his interest in learning can be traced back to a seminal moment at the 1924 Second Psychoneurological Congress in Leningrad. There it is reported that he gave an impressive speech challenging the prevailing Pavlovian and Gestalt psychological theory on the relation of conditioned reflexes to human consciousness and behaviour (Schunk 2000). Vygotsky proposed that humans, unlike animals who are responding to their environment, have the capacity to change their environments and this adaptive capacity distinguishes humans from animals (Schunk 2000). This understanding of the learning process is particularly significant in the context of this thesis because as Burbules (2000) suggests, many online learning environments are so predetermined by the instructor and designer that there is little capacity for students to adapt or change them through their interaction.

Vygotsky’s work is important in understanding how community supports learning because of his emphasis on the role of social interaction in the learning process. As Ernest (1994, p. 9) argues ‘Social constructivism regards individual subjects and the realm of the social as indissolubly interconnected. Human subjects are formed through their interactions with each other (as well as by the individual processes).’ Language is the primary enabling tool for this learning process within social discourse and within Vygotsky’s work, all learning is culturally and linguistically mediated (McMahon 1997). Vygotsky privileges language and its importance in human development to such an extent that he suggests ‘the most significant moment in the
course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge’ (Vygotsky 1978, p. 24). This concept is so central to the social constructivist model that Ernest (1994, p. 7) suggests there is not even a metaphor for the ‘wholly isolated individual mind’ within Vygotsky’s work. Ernest (1994, p. 7) suggests it is more appropriate to conceptualise the mind of an individual with the active metaphor of ‘persons in conversation’ and that the ‘mind is seen as part of a broader context, the social construction of meaning’. Language, cultural symbols and communication processes become the focus for examining what is happening for the learner in the process of learning.

The other key aspect of Vygotsky’s work that contributes to our understanding of why learning communities provide better learning environments is his concept of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is defined as ‘the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky 1978, p. 86). Vygotsky’s use of the term ‘zone’ related both to a spatial concept (two people actually being together in the same place) and to a relationship between the current knowledge level of the learner and the desired level of knowledge or skill. The ZPD for a particular learner is constructed by a number of factors: an appropriate learning task for that learner’s current skill/knowledge level, the presence of another person who is more advanced in the knowledge area, and the cultural tools that enable the learner to contextualise or
operationalise the new knowledge or skill. Russell provides an excellent discussion on ZPD with the following example to illustrate the concept:

An adult asks a young child to fetch a toy (object/motive) from a shelf that is too high for the child to reach without the aid of a stool and a stick placed in the room (cultural tools). When the child cannot immediately reach the toy, she may ask for aid from the adult, who then shows her how to use the tools to reach the toy. A zone of proximal development has formed between what the child could do without and what she could do through social interaction using certain cultural tools (stool, stick, words, and gestures).

(Russell 2002, p. 73)

The theory of the ZPD is that people learn better together, in environments where they can bounce ideas off each other and draw on each other’s experience. While Vygotsky’s work mainly focused on how children learn, it is easy to see how these same factors operate in learning environments with adults, particularly where collaboration is designed into the learning activities. Implicit in the example above, and in the concept of ZPD is that there is some form of relationship or level of trust between the learner (who is risking possible failure) and the teacher or fellow student from whom they are seeking assistance. The learner must trust that the person assisting them has some level of knowledge that might help them and also trust that the person they are seeking assistance from has the same goal from their interaction – i.e. that the learner will achieve a new level of knowledge or competency.
Trust and the social in learning

The idea that good pedagogy involves both the ‘content’ and the process of ‘teaching and learning’ is described and well analyzed by Lowry et al (2000). In analyzing the process Lowry makes a helpful distinction between the teaching strategies used (lecture, discussion, group project, etc.) and the ‘social and cultural aspects’ of establishing a ‘learning community’. Lowry et al (2000, p. 299) suggests ‘Groups, including groups of learners, need to establish a degree of psychological safety and rapport in order to function and proceed to learn the content’. Lowry et al (2000, p. 299) points out that the establishment of this trust between learners in a face-to-face learning environment ‘is usually the result of meeting and becoming more familiar with colleagues, expectations, procedures, and the norms of the group’. This usually occurs during the introductory components of a course such as the ‘introduction of the participants and the instructor, and review of the syllabus and expectations for behaviour’ (Lowry et al 2000, p. 299). Importantly Lowry et al (2000, p. 299) argues ‘activities like these begin to establish safety among group members and establishment of norms so that the group can proceed more efficiently and effectively’. Wolcott suggests these processes are so embedded in the face-to-face learning environment they are more or less taken for granted (cited in Lowry et al 2000). One of the questions this raises for developers and teachers creating online learning environments is how to replicate the complexity of face-to-face interaction in the online world in order to facilitate the development of trust relationships and thereby foster learning communities. Ragan sums up both the problem and the rationale for finding a solution:
When learners interact with one another, with an instructor, and with ideas, new information is acquired, interpreted, and made meaningful. Such interactions form the foundation of a community of learners. If students feel they are part of a community of learners, they are more apt to be motivated to seek solutions to their problems and to succeed. The challenge for distance educators is to design into the instructional situation strategies and techniques for establishing and maintaining "learning communities" among learners separated by space and/or time. (Ragan 1998 para. 13)

Clearly, the concept of community assisting students in their learning relates to a constructivist philosophy of learning where trust is an enabling factor for students. My research sought to establish if and how students developed these trust relationships or learning communities online and if the type of online environment they encountered shaped the quality or usefulness of the relationships. But what are we really talking about when we use the term ‘online’ and what really makes up ‘an online environment’? A quick glance at any journal relating to educational technologies will confirm that these terms have become as ubiquitous, and in some ways as nebulous, as the idea of ‘community’.

**Where Online Learning came from**

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) assisted learning grew out of the early development of the forerunner of the Internet. The use of early versions of the Internet in academic life is well documented by Castells (1996). Since 1983, a decade
before the Internet as it is known today was developed, academics in different disciplines (mainly scientific) communicated and shared ideas and information with colleagues from around the world via a forerunner of the Internet called the ARPANET. The ARPANET, drawing the name from the organisation which developed it, the US Defence Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), was a communications system which made use of existing telephone lines and devices known as Modems which allowed two digital devices to communicate over a cable or line (in this case the telephone line). There were a number of early networks operating via the ARPANET, including CSNET (Computer Science NETwork), which was used mainly by the scientific community, and BITNET (Because It’s Time NETwork), which was mainly used by non-science scholars. These multiple networks became known as the ARPA-Internet. The use of the Internet within universities in the early 1990s centred more on supporting the communication processes between academics collaborating on research projects and, to a lesser extent, on supporting communication between academics and students.

The use of the Internet and computer technology to provide course level learning environments has been contested in the literature from the earliest days. Some espouse utopian visions (Gilbert 1997), while others provide a critique of the likely implementation (Radford 1997) or question the quality possible in the online environment (Beckett 1998; Brabazon 2002). As early as 1995, the term Flexible Delivery was linked with the use of networked technology to deliver courses outside the traditional classroom context (George and Luke 1995), and by 1997 the term was in common usage to describe the use of the Internet to deliver all or part of a program. Since the late 1990s there has been a plethora of different terms developed to describe
the process of providing or engaging in an education process via a computer connected to the Internet. Each term seeks to describe the method used, the medium used or an implied benefit of this form of education (like ‘flexible delivery’). Richardson (2000, pp. 1-13) explores the history of various definitions, and uses the idea that the learner is separated via space (and possibly time) from the teacher as the defining feature of this form of education. As such, he continuously brings the various descriptors of this type of learning back to that of Distance Education. Other terms now in common use include distributed learning (Lea and Nicoll 2002), networked learning (Steeples and Jones 2002), cyberteaching (Partee 2002), online education (Weller 2002), e-learning, computer-managed learning (Jolliffe, Ritter et al. 2001), online teaching and learning (Department of Education 2003).

In some respects, the diversity of terms for Internet related learning reflects the convergence of paper-based distance education models with the growing use of the online medium and the introduction of CD-based materials in the delivery of courses. However, many of these terms also attempt to describe either the way technology is being employed (e.g. computer-managed learning) or to define the perceived benefit to the student of studying via the online medium (e.g. flexible delivery).

Various authors have recognised it is probably of more benefit to focus on what the student does in the online environment rather than trying to develop one all encompassing label. Harris (2001) suggests a three-category model, which loosely relates to the level of interactivity required or experienced by the student. These three categories are: Resource Delivery (typically readings, announcements and links to other web based material), Enhanced Communication (typically making use of the
peer-to-peer communication tools such as email and discussion boards), and Interactive Learning Environment (typically learning activities designed to be completed in the online environment including role plays and other online simulations). Each category represents a greater level of complexity in design and greater engagement by the student in the online environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Delivery</th>
<th>Enhanced Communication</th>
<th>Interactive Learning Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcements, readings, transcript of lectures, web links</td>
<td>Use of peer-to-peer email, discussion brds, chat environments</td>
<td>Activity defined role-plays, discussion brds, live conferences in chat environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplements on-campus</td>
<td>➔ ➔ ➔</td>
<td>Course completed solely online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest level of online activity required ➔ ➔</td>
<td>Highest level of online activity required ➔ ➔</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplest design</td>
<td>➔ ➔ ➔</td>
<td>More complex design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 (Harris 2001)

Weller has developed a useful two-axis, four-category model, which incorporates both the pedagogical approach being used, and the degree of 'technological sophistication embedded within the course' (2002, p. 146).
Some universities in Australia have also tried to create their own definitions of what online course delivery entails. Curtin University of Technology’s Office of Teaching and Learning has produced a four-category model similar to Harris’ to differentiate the various uses of the online medium:

- **Informational** - Unit outline and assessment details (course guide),
- **Supplemental** – Supplements other forms of instruction,
- **Dependent** – Essential that students use the online materials to complete the course, and
- **Fully Developed** – Course completed totally online.

(cited in Bell et al 2002, p. 5)

The Australian National University has created a five-category model similar to Curtin’s. It breaks the informational level into a handbook-type description of the course and a course guide level description with assessment details (cited in Bell et al 2002, p. 5). These attempts by various individuals and institutions illustrate the
complexity of trying to create meaningful categories by which we can understand how an online environment is being used, its purpose, and therefore what resources are likely to be consumed, required or allocated for the creation of the online environment.

In their national 2001 survey of online education and services, The Australian Commonwealth Department of Education and Training included courses that can be said to be web supplemented, web dependent, and fully online. (Bell et al 2002, p. 6). This thesis effectively focused only on those online environments designed to require a significant level of engagement by the student in the online environment for them to complete the course. In other words, there is significant emphasis placed on the constructed online environment to provide the 'place' and 'activities' that constituted the students’ experience of the course. But what exactly is an ‘online learning environment’? Despite the various attempts to define what online learning is, few authors actually discuss exactly what they mean by the term ‘environment’. What is it that actually constitutes a learning environment? What does it have in it? How do you know when you are in one? These are questions we rarely ask on campus because it is assumed we are in one.

**Learning Environments: do fish know they are in water?**

The term ‘environment’, like the term ‘community’, is often used in educational literature without definition and has various meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Bowden and Marton (1998) use the term to refer to the general mix of teaching strategies and resources students engage with during the learning process -
including the design of the actual activities. For example, a set of activities might be
designed to engage students in a particular way and could be described as creating a
more supportive learning environment.

Authors such as Bean and Metzner (1985), that are concerned with issues of
persistence and attrition have used the term to describe a set of external variables that
might affect a student’s life such as finances, hours of employment, family
responsibilities and outside encouragement. Others interested in the design of
educational software interfaces (Prasolova-Forland and Divitini 2002; Bouras and
Tsiatsos 2002) and the design of physical buildings (Blunden 2000) use the term to
describe the constructed space people inhabit (either physically or virtually).

For the purpose of this thesis, the first and the last of these interpretations of
environment are intertwined. Environment includes both the designed teaching and
learning activities, and the constructed spaces in which these activities take place.
This is, in some part, recognition that inherent within Bowden and Marton’s usage of
the term environment are a series of assumptions about the type of learning spaces
provided within universities for teaching - and that these spaces often shape the type
of learning activities possible within them. These assumptions are not unreasonable
given that most lecturers are employed into universities that pre-date their own birth
by decades if not centuries. These assumptions about the physical environment are
compounded by the fact that unlike many other institutions and business, universities
rarely move physical location. That is, even though they may merge and grow, their
original campus is usually still in place and for many of these ‘sandstone’ universities
these original buildings become almost the sacred territory of a glorious past. This
history of ‘bricks and mortar’ is of course both reflected in and compounded by a continuity of teaching practice in the form of lectures and tutorials. However, in the ever-evolving world of cyberspace many are making their own version of reality - some based on their experiences in this world and others on how they think the world should be.

How did we end up with Course Management Systems?

While many authors such as Rovai (2002), Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Steeples et al (2002) have suggested that the design of learning activities is important in the development of community in online courses, few included a critique of the actual online environment in which teachers design their learning activities and, in which, students engage to complete their course. This could be seen as an unintended continuation, albeit subtly, of a teacher-centred approach to learning. In effect, while educational theorists talk of being student-centred most still focus on how teachers can structure 'in-class' activities to engender social interactions. However, Goodyear (2002) questions the foundations of this approach when he argues we cannot actually create ‘community’ itself, but rather only the environment and structures that are likely to encourage it. Just as ‘we cannot influence directly the learner's cognitive activity . . . we cannot create or design communities - the best we can do is help set up some organisational forms or structures that are likely to be conducive to the formation and well-being of convivial learning relationships' (Goodyear 2002, p. 66). This shifting of the ‘locus of control’ (and in a way the responsibility) from teacher-created community to student-built community focuses our attention on the role of the constructed online environment in facilitating student engagement.
It is clear that many of the physical elements and common teaching practices found in on-campus learning environments have found their way into the online learning environment. Designers using established metaphors for places of learning such as 'classroom', and tools used by teachers such as 'blackboards', have created online worlds that conform to these metaphors.

It is useful to explore this idea of metaphor in the design of online learning environments because, as Lakeoff and Johnson (2003) argue, metaphors are central in our learning and communicating of ideas to one another. Interestingly, there is little published research on the relationship between learning theory and the metaphors used to design online environments. Typical of recently published papers, Meyers (2002), in attempting to provide a useful taxonomy of metaphors relevant to online learning environments, draws on established bodies of published works to clearly develop an elaborate system of categories for interface metaphors, scenario metaphors and content metaphors. However, she comments, 'In what concerns design metaphors for learning environments, research seems to be quite rare' (italics my emphasis) (Meyers 2002, p. 449).

For the most part, discussion about metaphor in the literature tends to relate to the use of metaphors in the learning process or design of learning activities - rather than the design of the actual environment in which these processes or activities take place. The discussion of metaphor becomes important within the design of online environments, for as Dillenbourg et al (1993, p. 33) reminds us, metaphors 'translate psychological concepts into design principles'. If the metaphors used in the design of online learning
environments are teacher-centred and focus solely on the learning processes the
teacher designs (has oversight of or for which they are present) obviously much of the
student’s experience of life outside the classroom will not make it into the design
process. This is, evidently, what has informed the design of most of the commercially
available Course Management Systems commonly used in Australia. Many of these
Course Management Systems easily translate transmission style teaching approaches
to teaching into the electronic medium, providing an easy method of uploading text-
based documents and PowerPoint slides of lectures for academic staff.

While some authors report favourable experiences provided by CMS (such as
Alexander cited in Weller 2002; Partee 2002), many are starting to question the need
to rethink the design of the learning activities into more constructivist approaches
(Brown and Johnson-Shull 2000). However, few are questioning the overall design of
the online environment in which the learning activities run. An exception to this is the
work of Hung and Chen (2001) who clearly question the capacity of current web-
based eLearning environments to deliver 'vibrant and sustaining learning communities'
and ask 'why is it that many web-sites have chat rooms, discussion boards, bulletin boards and other similar forums when they just do not work, in that
they do not foster a rich and sustained dialogue among participants?' (Hung and Chen
2001, p. 3).

Hung and Chen situate their discussion within a Vygotskian understanding of learning
as a social practice, which includes a learner’s interactions with others and their
environment over time. They conclude 'if we adopt the central underpinnings of
situated cognition, it is the history of a relationship that causes an outcome, not the
actions of one or another party alone' (Hung and Chen 2001, p. 4). Their use of Vygotsky's ZPD to further analyse the learning process leads them to question the 'environment' in its broadest possible meaning, including what they term the 'infrastructure' of a learning environment. This infrastructure includes what the authors have called the three tenets: 'rules and processes, accountability mechanisms and facilitating structures' (Hung and Chen 2001, p. 9). This third tenet of infrastructure, the ‘facilitating structures’ is described as the structures that actualise daily operations; the face-to-face environment this is represented by physical space and what is designed into the environment to facilitate interaction. A quick glance around any university campus in Australia would provide examples of these ‘facilitating structures’ in the form of cafes, seating areas, BBQ’s, etc. Some are successful (i.e. they generally have students just hanging out in them) and some remain deserted and unused. In the online world, Hung and Chen argue this infrastructure is the 'underlying information architecture of the online community' (2001, p. 9). These authors suggest that it is this area of eLearning that 'has been relatively unexplored in Web-based eLearning environments', and that 'radical transformation' may be needed in our understanding and application of these ideas to create 'vibrant and sustaining e-learning communities' (Hung and Chen 2001, p.10). The idea of ‘radical transformation’ sits a little outside my own experience of change in university life. However, if there is to be radical change in the development of online learning environments to foster vibrant learning communities, we must turn to the experiences of students to provide us with the appropriate metaphors to inform this new design through research such as this. It will be important to understand both how students develop these social connections on-campus and, more importantly (since much of their life is also online now), how they might develop these
connections in a variety of Internet based environments. This research explores both these aspects of a student’s life – but is the term ‘community’ really appropriate? The term is widely used now to describe social interactions and relations of many kinds - from people who walk their dogs on the same stretch of grass but may not actually know each other, to suicidal teenagers in Japan who meet others online to form suicide pacts with - that the term community has become a sort of ‘empty signifier’. It means almost anything – not unlike terms such as ‘globalisation’ and ‘communication’. So what is this thing called community and does it really relate to trust in learning?

Community

The idea of community, how it is created in different virtual environments, and whether it is valuable for learning is central to this research. To explore this idea of community in an online learning environment required clarity on the concept of community and how it related to physical space.

The moment one delves beyond an assumed understanding of the term ‘community’, it quickly becomes apparent that the meaning assigned to the word 'community' is contextual, ambiguous and contested. From political critiques of the term, to romanticised images of harmonious hamlets, the term community conjures up notions of belonging and this belonging links an individual in different ways with concepts of space, place, time, commonality and identity. In whatever way the term is used, it is fair to say that even though it is a contested term, the concept of community runs deep
within our collective psyche. For the purposes of this project, the idea of community and feeling a part of one is generally understood to be both positive and desirable.

The problem of defining community is not new. Nor is it a straightforward question. While popular use of the term by politicians, statisticians and cartographers tends to suggest that communities are geographically or location based, most authors recognise that the community stretches far beyond the picket fences or sandstone walls of any one location or institution. As Kenny points out in her book Developing Communities for the Future, ‘the term community is beleaguered by a range of meanings, many of which carry strong ideological connotations’ (1994, p. 8). Indeed, the unqualified use of the term 'community' to describe nebulous, romanticised notions has been roundly criticised since the early 1980’s from within the welfare sector (Bryson and Mowbray 1981) and again, more recently, in Bauman's work Community: seeking safety in an insecure world, where the author refers to community as a 'paradise lost'. Bauman (2001, p. 3) argues 'in short, "community" stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us … but one to which we dearly hope to return, and so we feverishly seek the roads that may bring us there'. Lemos (1996, p. 43) agrees, suggesting 'the idea of community is above all a modern notion, an invention of modernity, because it is only with the appearance of new forms of social organisation that the previous model (the community) could be identified and examined'.

Despite concerns about the use of the term as a ‘one size fits all’ type of concept, most authors try to develop some consensus on a definition. Kenny suggests this is not an easy task. A study by Hillery (cited in Kenny 1994, p. 32) in 1955 ‘identified ninety-four definitions and found many inconsistencies between them’. Somewhere within
these wide range of definitions lies ‘the person’ and Kenny (1994, p. 32) suggests that it is the presence of ‘some common identity’, which is the basis around which community is formed. She provides many examples of what this common identity might be, including class, geographical location, cultural values, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, workplace, or age (Kenny 1994, p. 32). Wilbur (2000, p. 47), while providing an excellent etymology of the term, also identifies the difficulties in providing a working definition of 'community' when he suggests 'The roots of community are sunk deep into rather abstract terrain'. However, he also agrees with the core elements that 'what is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas' (Wilbur 2000, p. 47). The idea that community is based around such diverse notions as commonality of identity, interest or geography indicates how important the individual’s experience is in defining what a community is. But are students really part of a community? Students enrolling at a university might be seen as part of a community because they can be categorised across all three of these elements: they are students (identity), enrolling within a particular field or course (interest), at a particular university campus (location). When educationalists explore issues about student engagement and persistence they often use the term community to signify the type of supportive environment they believe students will flourish in. Obviously, in online learning environments the location students “attend” has become Virtual, and this raises the question - can they still be part of a community if they don’t come to the campus? Is the term community still a relevant or useful concept to understand how students support each other in online learning environments?
Just as our understanding of teaching and learning is being challenged by the use of new technology, there is evidence that our definition of community is also being redefined by changes in technologies such as the Internet. These new communication technologies have the capacity to alter the relationship between space, place and time. There is evidence that these changes are altering the way we communicate with each other and the types of communities we are forming. As Wellman and Gulia (1999, p. 169) suggest 'in sociological terms we have moved on from seeing communities as location based and acknowledge that most support comes from social networks’ and ‘due to new technologies these social networks are not locality based'. This has effectively required a 'conceptual revolution’, which is redefining community not only in 'terms of space - neighbourhoods', but also 'in terms of social networks' (Wellman and Gulia 1999, p. 169). This shift in our understanding of community from a location based concept to one more aptly defined by the supports or networks which people are seeking, has been gradual - often related to our ability to shift our physical bodies through space quicker or else being able to transcend space altogether with new technologies.

Although notions of community that include an understanding of peoples’ social networks echo aspects of Toennies’ (1963) work, Mitchell points to a basic change in the nature of community away from connections made between people based on geographical location or physical connection toward people forming and maintaining connections and social relationships via new technologies. He argues:

‘… as telepresence augments and sometimes substitutes for physical presence, and as more and more business and social interactions shift into cyber space, we are finding that accessibility depends even less on propinquity, and
community has come increasingly unglued from geography. Our network connections are becoming as important to us as our bodily locations' (Mitchell 1995, p. 166).

Mitchell’s use of the term ‘network’ here reflects this shift away from location based definitions of community toward the growing importance of computer and communications networks in the development of future communities.

In reviewing the available research on community in an educational context, it is clear that authors have woven these various meanings together. When the term community is used, it often refers to a mix of social connections and relationships between students and the support these might provide in an educational context. For the purpose of providing a working definition of community for this project, I have adopted this same understanding of community but also coined the new term Social Learning Support Network (SLSN) as a reflection on the utility aspect of a community created in this context.

**Community in an educational context**

The value of developing learning communities or Social Learning Support Networks in tertiary learning environments is well documented in the face-to-face educational literature, and the concept has been broadly adopted in the online learning literature. Tinto’s research into the benefits of learning communities for first year on-campus undergraduate students is often cited by those educators and policy makers interested in the issues of student engagement and the quality of higher education in Australia (McInnis 2001). A scan of Tinto’s work reveals a 25-year interest in student
persistence and attainment in higher education. Much of Tinto's latter work is drawn from (or built on) the findings from a major research project into collaborative learning conducted in the mid 1990’s, funded by the U.S Federal Government, and the U.S Department of Education. Tinto’s (1994) research built on the understanding that the more students were involved in college, the more they got out of it. The question for Tinto was how to get them more involved. There were a number of ‘collaborative learning’, ‘student engagement’ and ‘learning community’ type projects operating in universities in America at the time, and the research team decided to use three case studies to explore the issues. They focused on two simple questions. Firstly, ‘Do learning communities make a difference?’ and secondly; ‘if so, how?’ (Tinto 1994, p. 2). The project set out to answer these questions by examining the experience of students in three contrasting learning community programs operating in three different higher education institutions in America: the Freshman Interest Group program at the University of Washington; the learning community clusters at LaGuardia Community College; and the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research project sample included 1190 first year students made up of 549 learning community students and 641 traditional class students.

The project found that learning communities did make a difference for students and reported that the benefits of creating learning communities for students extended beyond just a better understanding of the content at hand. Benefits included:
• Learning community students developed their own self-supporting groups, they spent more time together outside of the classroom and did so in ways students reported as supportive (Tinto 2000)

• Learning community students became more actively involved in classroom learning (Tinto 2000)

• Participation in the learning community seemed to enhance the quality of the student learning. Learning community students perceived themselves as having made significantly greater intellectual gains over the course of the semester than did other students (Tinto 2000)

• That learning community students persisted into second year at a rate twenty-five percentage points higher than non learning community students (Tinto 2000)

• Students in these programs reported an increased sense of responsibility to participate in the learning experience, and an awareness of their responsibility for both their learning and the learning of others. (Tinto 2000)

Tinto suggests there were some common factors in the design of the three programs investigated that were key to their success. Most notably, these programs wove the student’s academic and social experiences together in a planned manner that sought to ‘restructure the very classrooms in which students found themselves and alter the way students experience both the curriculum and learning within those classrooms’ (Tinto 2000, p. 48). An aspect of their social experience was embedded in their timetable, and the curriculum was embedded in their social time. This mix allowed students to create real connections that resulted in the improvements documented above. Tinto’s work has also been used to inform the design of new models to understand student
engagement and retention (Bean and Metzner cited in Rovai 2002). Notably, most models include a focus on the level of social engagement experienced by students and, in particular, Ashar and Skenes (1993) argue that this is a significant factor in student success.

The implications of this research for on-campus students are clear. Creating learning environments in which students can flourish requires creating environments that encourage them to develop the types of social connections that support their learning - in other words, to become members of a learning community. Tinto’s research provides the evidence for, and demonstrates how to create the type of environments on campus where students do not just survive, but flourish. Unfortunately, there is little published evidence of any coordinated attempts to fully use the successful aspects of Tinto’s learning community models in developing similar learning communities in Australian universities.

Australian university web sites reveal that most institutions have ‘transition sites’ of one form or another which generally acknowledge the importance of first year students feeling part of the university community and encourage students to become actively involved in their university. While many universities have set up transition programs that provide on-campus activities within first semester as a way of linking in students (for example see The University of Western Australia - Get Linked http://www.linkweek.uwa.edu.au), this is very different to what Tinto described. In Australia there is little evidence of any university-wide, systematic attempts to create the type of learning communities described by Tinto, which purposefully link
individual courses within an academic program in such a way as to support groups of students to form learning communities.

There is some evidence that the benefits of being part of a learning community are recognised by those who are trying to measure the quality of ‘the student experience’ in Australian universities. Interestingly, the University of Melbourne commissioned a project to develop an extended version of the current *Course Experience Questionnaire* (CEQ) that, among other things, sought to measure students’ perceptions of the social experience of learning at university by including a ‘Learning Community Scale’ (McInnis et al 2001). Further to this, the University of New South Wales details a range of projects designed to enhance the relationship between research and teaching by developing programs that ‘build a sense of the university as a learning community and offer students the opportunity to belong to and participate in that community’ (McInnis 2003, pp 12-14). Tinto’s work is cited in both these reports and clearly the idea of thinking of universities as learning communities is starting to have some currency in Australia. What does this mean for the development of learning environments online and on-campus? Tinto’s research used collaborative learning models to explore what he believed was the development of ‘community’ between students. At the heart of a collaborative approach to learning is a social constructivist theory of learning, but has this theory of learning been translated into the online world of learning in universities?

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3 The CEQ is a national survey of all graduate students in Australia conducted annually
Community in online learning environments: has there been a revolution?

As discussed previously, questions remain about the quality of the online courses and their capacity to retain students. However, there is now a large body of literature arguing the importance of creating community for students studying online as a panacea to some of the questions about quality. In the research literature relating to online learning environments many authors include the development of learning communities as key factors in successful online courses (Clark 1999; Gunawardena et al 2001; Lave and Wenger 1991; Palloff and Pratt 1999; Palloff and Pratt 2001; Palloff and Pratt 2003; Palloff and Pratt 2005; Ragan 1998; McConnell 2006). The most detailed and comprehensive of these offerings has been the work of Palloff and Pratt, who over four books have argued that the development of student learning communities was central to online learning environments. They wrote:

Key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions. In other words, the formation of a learning community through which knowledge is imparted and meaning is co-created sets the stage for successful learning outcomes (1999, p. 5).

Larose et al (1999), in their excellent paper on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teacher education training, suggest that within the Australian university context the adoption of ICTs is not only seen as ‘a condition of survival’ for many institutions wanting to be seen as technologically advanced, but
also provides the context for modifying the existing use of behaviourist approaches in favour of social constructivist teaching practices. Larose et al (1999) argue that the introduction of ICT’s provided the context for institutions to resource collaborative forms of course development.

So while many of the early examples of online learning environments, often created by under resourced academic staff, simply tried to replicate existing on-campus practices (effectively creating electronic forms of lectures), it is now recognised within many institutions that the pedagogy used to inform these courses is not appropriate for the online learning environment. As such, many Australian universities have developed centralised ‘learning technology’ units that have adopted a collaborative approach to the development of courses using online learning environments. This team approach to the development of online learning environments provides an excellent opportunity for the integration of the latest educational theories into practical application. However, it should be noted that this approach has often led to the development of a two-tier system in most universities in Australia. The first tier is characterised by significant resource allocations for the development of a small number of courses using this team approach. The second tier is generally made up of academics working independently to integrate the use of information technologies, such as the Internet, into new or redeveloped courses. This distinction is particularly relevant because much of the literature relating to online courses is drawn from case studies from this first tier, while the vast majority of students’ experiences of online learning are from courses developed from the second tier.
While many of these first tier case studies use the term ‘community’ to describe the connection they desire to create between students, few define what actually community means. Further, none of them reviewed for this project have researched students’ perceptions of the significance of community to their learning process. While authors such as Schrage (1990), Wolcott (1996) and more recently Palloff and Pratt (1999), Rich and Woolfe (2001) and Albon and Trinidad (2002) provide advice for fostering learning communities in online courses, most provide only anecdotal evidence of positive student experiences within the learning community created.

An exception to this is Kirkup (2002) who provides an excellent theoretical grounding of what community means and uses Wenger’s (1998) model of social learning to argue the significance of identity creation in the learning process. However, Kirkup (2002, p. 194) questions the capacity of existing ‘solely Internet-based education’ to provide anything more than a second-rate learning environment for students. Kirkup (2002, p. 194) argues that ‘An understanding of the relationship between community, meaning and identity in learning may help to produce sophisticated designs for distributed learning systems that have a more grounded understanding of the role of the community in learning and are better able to choose media on the basis of their strengths’. Conversely Goodyear (2002), a proponent of the use of online learning environments, draws on the work of Shuell to provide a thorough exploration of learning theory in the tertiary environment, and also suggests that the development of community for online students underpins a collaborative, constructivist approach appropriate at a tertiary level.
The idea of trying to ensure social interaction occurs, with the view to developing a stronger sense of community amongst students, has also led to debates about ‘where’ in the online environment these interactions should occur. Should they be designed within the main body of the online course or should there be a separate social space created for this purpose? Nunes et al (2002) have provided evidence that these social spaces should be created and managed separately from the course content site, although latter evaluation of this approach found few students used the separate site (McPherson et al 2002). In line with this, Weller (2002) cites various authors who suggest that the removal of the informal social space from within online courses may also be harmful to the group activities of the course.

These authors, however, and others reviewed for this project, limit their ideas for the creation of a learning environment to Bowden and Marton’s (1998) previously discussed use of the term ‘environment’. This definition of environment refers to the general mix of teaching strategies, the design of learning activities and the resources students engage with during the learning process. It does not include the constructed online space into which students login or inhabit while they are studying online. It is interesting to ponder why those theorists concerned with the quality of online learning experiences for students, do not question the role of the constructed online environment in shaping the students’ experience. As I have suggested, I believe that is it because for the most part - as on-campus teaching staff - many just accept the physical space provided by the architects of the university and focus only on the sphere of their control: being the processes, resources and strategies they design for a course. This acceptance has extended to the online environment, which is usually provided in the form of an enterprise-wide CMS.
If one explores beyond the eLearning literature related to the development of learning environments there were some interesting ideas developed in the area of teleworking in the mid 1990’s and expanded upon subsequently in the areas of Computer Supported Co-Operative Work (CSCW) and Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVE). The work related fields of CSCW and CVE have engaged with the question of how the design of the online environment supports the development of improved working relationships. This included discussions on the value of social connections, the role of incidental (or what the field termed ‘chance encounters’), and the need to consciously design for these factors in the development of work orientated online environments and processes. An excellent overview of this literature is provided by Churchill et al (2001). Interestingly in the elearning literature reviewed for this project there has been no reference to this earlier work. While it is reasonable to argue that there are significant differences between the world of work and the structure experience of learning, one could ponder how current CMS might have benefited from these earlier insights.

Beyond the body of elearning literature that argues the importance of creating community for students studying online, there is surprisingly little independent research on students’ own perceptions of the significance or experience of community in online learning environments. Literature in this area largely consists of anecdotal reports by educators of their own students’ experiences (which are usually positive) of the various interventions designed to create a learning community in a particular course delivered by that educator. An exception to this is the work of Alfred Rovai whose concern about online course student attrition rates led him to the connections
made in the literature between student retention and their engagement in a learning community (Rovai 2003; Rovai 2002). Published over several articles, Rovai reports on a project that sought to 'develop and field-test the Classroom Community Scale' in order to better understand the effectiveness of various models and interventions proposed within the literature. This 20 item quantitative scale measured a student’s sense of community in an online learning environment and combines two factors: a student’s feeling of connectedness and their experience of support for their learning generated in a course. Rovai (2002) used this scale to create a statistically reliable instrument that can be applied across any online learning environment. Rovai’s (2002) work is significant not just because he has created a quantitative instrument which appears sensitive enough to detect differences in 'sense of community' for students across a range of courses (his research involved 375 students across 28 courses), but importantly, his scale also provides a link between a student’s sense of connectedness with their peers and a sense of support in their learning. Of particular significance for this thesis is Rovai’s suggestion, when referring to the significant differences in the level of community experienced by students in the various online learning environments included in his study that:

'This finding leads one to hypothesize that classroom community is sensitive to online course design and/or pedagogy, since these factors were left uncontrolled in this study. Additional research is required to identify course design and pedagogy-related variables that promote stronger sense of community in online courses' (Rovai 2002, p. 208).

Another exception to the generally anecdotal research provided in the literature, but this time from a qualitative perspective, is the work of Conrad (2002). Conrad
explored mature age, undergraduate students’ perceptions of community, what it was, how it was formed and how it was sustained. Using a sample of seven, she provides quite detailed accounts of these students’ understanding of community, how it is formed and its utility. She concludes, ‘The findings of this study reflected the careful deliberations of a small group of online learners. It would be useful to our understanding of online community to hear the experiences of more learners qualitatively’ (Conrad 2002, p. 13).

Through all these accounts of students’ experiences of online learning it is important to note that there is rarely any distinction made between the needs of postgraduate students versus those of undergraduate students. Most authors, as part of the demographic sections of their papers identify their students as either postgraduate or undergraduate, but there is little discussion of the appropriateness or otherwise of community for these very different groups of students. Is it likely that the idea of building community for each of these groups of students will be different, require a different emphasis on the way connections are developed, or result in the connections students make being applied differently. Rather than treating students as one homogenous group in the online environment, perhaps their need for social connection or learning support is quite different and will require a different approach to the development of community - possibly even a different online learning environment.

In conclusion it is clear, whether we are concerned with either the quality of the educational experience provided for students or the retention of students in online learning environments, the development of learning communities is likely to be a
significant piece of the puzzle. This chapter has outlined that there is general agreement within the literature of the value of learning communities for on-campus students and there is a claim that there is a need to create learning communities in online courses. However, there has been little independent qualitative research on how students view community in online learning environments or if they even believe it is necessary. Importantly, there has also been little published research on how the design of the virtual world and the environment students inhabit for the duration of their course or program, influences the development of such communities. This research sought to further our understanding of these issues in two ways. Firstly, by exploring the significance of community for both postgraduate and undergraduate students studying online. Secondly, by examining how the design of the virtual environment encountered by a student might contribute to the development of community and why.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Understanding your question is one thing – working out what you will need to answer that question is another! This chapter outlines the ‘how’ of this research. It provides both a clear overview of the methodological nuts and bolts, as well as arguing a case for the various choices that shaped the research design. I will firstly detail the underlying research philosophy and approach that informed my research design. Then I will outline the methodology and the method of data analysis I used. Finally, I will describe the three case studies: including the choice of each sample group; the ethical issues raised by the choice of a particular case; the processes followed to obtain the sample group; and the choice of methods used to gather the data for each case.

I wanted to explore the significance of community for tertiary students studying online. As I have suggested, the concept of ‘community’ can be a woolly one. Neuman (2000) suggests it is important to be clear about the concepts and theories assumed by the researcher. One reason for being clear has to do with the relationship between the researcher and the people s/he is working with. Research participants will generally overlay their own, everyday meaning on them, possibly leading to confusion for both researchers and participants or problematic assumptions about respondent’s responses. Exploring the significance of community in the online learning environment required providing participants with a clear understanding of what community meant in this context and developing a set of guiding questions for the project. As such, community was discussed with participants in the context of the types of social networks that might develop between students that could possibly support their learning. The initial questions sought to cast a wide net to capture the
nuances of what might be happening for students, without loading the entire ‘quality in online learning’ agenda, discussed in much of the online learning literature. Questions guiding the research were:

1. Did students think community was important to them?
2. Had students experienced this sense of community in either the face-to-face environment or in an online learning environment?
3. How did they believe community developed in the learning environment?
4. Did students believe these social networks supported their learning processes and if so, how?

The project was expanded after the analysis of the data from the case and a fifth question was added:

5. What role did the constructed online environment play in facilitating the development of these social networks?

Each of the three case studies explored these questions. My decision to carry out three case studies was a consequence of my understanding of key issues in the literature as well as my own learning from each of the case studies.

**The Interpretive Paradigm**

Neuman (2000) suggests there are three dominant research paradigms relevant to the social sciences; positivist, interpretive and critical, and that it is important to clearly identify a project’s epistemological position. This project is situated within the interpretive paradigm because, unlike the positivist perspective which seeks to apply ‘a scientific model to study the social world' (Bryman 2004, p. 13) in the belief that there is a ‘reality’ which exists independently of the human actor’s perceptions (Sarantakos 1995), the interpretive paradigm suggests people construct meaning
through their social life and use these interpretations to construct relations, engage in interactive behaviours, build institutions, make policy and so forth (Neuman 2000).

Understanding this epistemological position is important because our understanding of the world shapes the methods used to research it and how we make sense of the data gathered. Having a worldview that sees students as actors in their world, who seek and construct meaning out of their contact with each other and their environment, translates into a choice of research methods that allows students to interpret both their actions and interactions in the context of the environment in which they study. The methodologies derived from this paradigm seek ‘to understand or interpret – actors’ meanings’ (Jary and Jary 1991, p. 326) and, as such, they provided the most appropriate framework and set of tools for gathering and analysing the data for this project. This project employed a number of data collection methods including interviews, questionnaires, logged online conversations, participants’ journals and field notes from observations. These methods were chosen because they allowed students to explore the significance of community by interpreting their perceptions of how student life worked, what role the social interactions they experienced had in developing learning support networks, and allowed them to attribute meaning to their social interactions in both the on-campus and online learning environments in which they studied. Similarly, as a researcher, understanding what role the constructed online environment played in shaping the social interactions between students involved both interpreting my own observations of students’ behaviour in the different environments, and asking students to both reflect on and interpret their own experiences of the constructed online environments in which they studied.
Grounded Theory Research

This project used a grounded theory approach as the framework for exploring the significance of community for students and the role of the constructed online learning environment. Sarantakos (1995) suggests grounded theory is both popular and a useful approach for many social scientists because, although grounded in empirical data, it often does not rely on the collection of huge volumes of material. Rather, grounded theory relies on interpretations emerging through successive iterations of research enquiry (Sarantakos 1995; Bryman 2004). In this project, these iterations of research enquiry are represented by each of the case studies. The iterative nature of a grounded theory approach provided the flexibility of data collection methods required for each case, and informed the iterative development of the specific questions explored in a case.

A key aspect of grounded theory is the concept of the ‘autonomous research unit’, represented by the individual cases in this research. Within the grounded theory approach it is understood that each ‘autonomous research unit’ has its ‘own structure, boundaries and history’ (Sarantakos 1995, p. 269). While it was expected that the key themes that emerged from the analysis of a single case would inform the continuing research process, each case needed to be ‘studied as a case and reconstructed as a case, not as an element of something else’ (Sarantakos 1995, p. 269). Within this research, the same approach was applied in the site selection for each case and in the choice of data collection methods used across the different sites. Although a range of qualitative data collection methods were used, each method was specifically chosen to provide the ‘best fit’ available for accessing the case sample group, as well as
providing the participants with as much flexibility and scope for reflection on their own understanding of what was happening and what they believed to be important.

**The use of a qualitative approach**

While most research texts still clearly talk about the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, some authors are now starting to question the value of categorising, and therefore possibly limiting, the design of projects by insisting on a binary distinction between quantitative or qualitative research designs (de Vaus 2001; Bryman 2004). Rather than engage in lengthy debate on the issue, Yin (2003b, p. 33) simply suggests that quantitative data collection methods should be used for those things that are best represented by numbers whereas qualitative data collection methods should be used for those things that ‘cannot readily be converted to numerical values’. A qualitative approach has been used throughout this project because, rather than testing a single hypothesis or counting the occurrences of some phenomena, the cases have been used to understand the complexity and nuances of what students think about community: if and how community supports their learning and how (or under what circumstances) community is created amongst a group of students studying in a particular type of online learning environment.

While other methods could have been used in this project, the qualitative method was particularly appropriate because as Schunk suggests:

‘Qualitative research is especially useful when researchers are interested in the structure of events rather than the overall distributions, [secondly] when the meanings and perspectives of individuals are important, but actual
experiments are impractical or unethical, [and thirdly] when a desire to search for new potential causal linkages that have not been discovered by experimental methods exists’ (Schunk 2000, p. 5).

Schunk's three points encapsulate some of my key desires, challenges and research goals. Firstly, I wanted to understand the structures and underlying features of how these three groups of students perceived and understood community. I also wanted to understand the significance of community and how it might develop amongst a group of students. This is in contrast to other studies that have, for example, tried to ‘test’ for the existence of a community for a group of students (Rovai 2002).

Secondly, one of the challenges of this project was to gain a deeper understanding of how people connect with each other in different online settings. From the initial literature review, while it was evident that the idea of ‘incidental’ social contact may be an important factor in the development of non-educational face-to-face and online communities (Huxor 2001), the educational literature reviewed for this project was silent on the role of ‘incidental’ social contact in the development of learning communities in either the face-to-face or online learning environments. As such, in the second and third cases, this project sought to understand the subtle linkages between three factors: the idea of ‘incidental’ social contact, the role of the constructed online environment, and the development of a sense of community between the students.

Thirdly, I wanted to move beyond the anecdotal discussions of community in online learning environments, which typified much of the current literature, into a deeper,
more holistic understanding of a student’s experience. Unlike a purely quantitative method, the use of a qualitative approach in this study provided the opportunity for new concepts and patterns of relating to emerge from the data, which was rich in detail and context sensitive. Neuman (2000, p. 419) suggests it is this blending together of empirical evidence and abstract concepts that makes qualitative research ‘capable of showing the complex processes or sequences of social life’ required by a project such as this to develop a better understanding of how a student’s social interactions might support their learning.

However, it is also important to note some of the limitations of this method. Projects designed using qualitative methods generally rely on a smaller sample group than those using quantitative methods. This smaller sample group size may raise issues about the capacity of the study to represent the larger population and may limit the generalisation of the findings (Schunk 2000, p. 6). Regarding this research project, it is clear that what is being explored in each case are the reflections of a subset of students. Although the size of the sample group was, for each of the case studies, representative of those studying the specific course from which the sample was drawn (around a 50% participation rate was achieved in each), as Bryman (2004) argues of qualitative studies, it is not possible and nor is it the intention of this project to claim that the findings outlined in the following chapters represent a universal truth for all students studying online. Rather, the implications of this research should be interpreted as contributing to our general understanding of online learning communities.
Rationale for a Multiple-Case Study Design

As discussed in the literature review, while there have been quantitative studies designed to establish tools that could ‘measure classroom community’ (Rovai 2002), there has not been much qualitative research into the significance of community for students studying online that was not generally conducted by the teaching staff within the course or program. In consulting various research design texts, it became obvious that the use of a case study was a common vehicle used by both social researchers investigating various social aspects of communities (de Vaus 2001; Yin 2003a; Yin 2003b; Bryman 2004) and by those engaged in research within an educational setting (Burgess 1984; Lancy 1993; Cohen and Manion 1994; Stake 1995; Bell 1999). Yin (2003a) suggests case studies are particularly useful when a researcher is seeking to understand the relational patterns or understand the complex social phenomena occurring within a social context. This was particularly relevant for this project because I wanted to understand individual students’ perceptions of their own engagement with each other, the types of social connections they made, and if these social connections supported their learning.

Case studies also offered a level of flexibility pertinent to this project. As Bell (Bell 1999, p. 11) suggests, this type of research design is particularly useful for the solo researcher because it allows them ‘to concentrate on a specific instance or situation and to identify, or attempt to identify, the various interactive processes at work’ within the boundaries of a single context or case. In the context of this project, the
boundaries became the different types of constructed online environments represented in each of the cases studied.

Gall et al (1996) suggests case studies offer many benefits for social researchers, but in particular the authors highlight the emergent quality of this research approach which was important in the design of this grounded theory project:

Another advantage of case studies is their emergent quality. As researchers collect data and gain insight into particular phenomena, they can change the case on which the study will focus, adopt new data-collection methods, and frame new research questions. In contrast, quantitative research designs are difficult to change once they are set into motion (Gall et al 1996, p. 585).

I believe my decision to use a multiple-case study approach for this research was both a practical one and one that added to the robustness of the research. The strength of a grounded theory approach is the capacity to iteratively develop themes from the data, and the use of multiple cases supported this process. Following the collection and analysis of data from the first case study, the online learning environment (including the interface and the learning content and activities) for this course was significantly redesigned. This effectively made further data collection within this case problematic. However, as discussed previously, analysis of the data prompted the expansion of the project to include the design of the constructed online environment. This effectively required a shift to the use of a multiple-case style comparative study.

Yin (2003a) provides a strong argument for the use of multiple-case studies in the design of a project such as this and offers researchers the following advice:
If given the choice (and the resources), multiple-case designs may be preferred over single-case designs. In particular, if you can do a two-case study, your chances of producing robust results will be better than using a single-case design (Yin 2003a, p. 135).

In the initial literature reviewed for this project, the use of single-case studies to explore the various aspects of community in educational environments was prevalent, and many of these case studies involved researchers who were also teachers in the course or programs that formed the case. In the design of this project, I wanted to ensure that each case provided a clearer understanding of the significance of community for tertiary students studying online, either because it confirmed existing ideas prevalent in the literature or because it challenged these ideas. The use of a multiple-case study allowed me to develop a robust and complex understanding of the significance of community for tertiary students in a number of different online learning environments.

**Ethical considerations**

Schunk (2000, p. 5) alludes to important ethical considerations relevant to this research where he suggests the use of qualitative methods is preferable 'when the meanings and perspectives of individuals are important, but actual experiments are impractical or unethical'. The primary goal of all the students involved in these cases was to successfully complete their particular course, rather than take part in a research project. As such, it was crucial to select methods that would provide the least disruption possible to their learning process, while still providing the student with the
broadest scope possible to reflect and report on their understandings of community and the role it might play in supporting their learning. The initial design of this project was submitted to the RMIT Faculty of the Constructed Environment Research Committee’s Ethics sub-committee with a risk assessment of ‘No risk above the everyday’. The basis for this assessment was threefold. Firstly, the content matter did not require personal disclosure likely to create harm or discomfort to the individual. Secondly, anonymity and confidentiality of the participants’ contributions was assured by means of a secure and coded method of data storage. Thirdly, even though the research participants were still students at RMIT (a fact that would usually result in an ‘at risk’ assessment), I as the primary investigator, was not employed in any teaching capacity by RMIT during the data gathering phase and therefore no dependent relationship existed between the participants and the investigator. Ethics approval was granted on 17th January 2001 and the first case study interviews were completed by October 2001.

In November 2001 the original masters project was upgraded to a doctoral project. This was done based on both the initial findings from the first case study and the scope of the inquiry. The subsequent redesign of the project was then expanded to include a further two cases. This inclusion of a further two cases in the research design posed no additional ethics related issues for the project as the participants for the new cases had no perceived additional risk factors, the nature of the inquiry was the same, and there was no dependent relationship between the researcher and the participants.
Another significant ethical issue for social researchers is that participants should be fully informed about the project and any risks they may encounter prior to agreeing to take part (Bryman 2004). Authors such as Cohen and Manion (1994), Gall et al (1996) and Bell (1999) all provide useful advice on designing plain language research statements that ensure participants feel they are able to provide informed consent. Each case setting in this study required a different method of ensuring students were fully informed about the research prior to them providing consent to participate. David de Vaus (2001) was particularly helpful in guiding the design of the various plain language research statements for each of the cases, copies of which are provided in the appendices.

The final ethical issue of relevance for this project was the need to ensure the privacy of the individuals who agreed to participate in the project. As Gall et al (1996) suggest, this involves both ensuring the privacy of the individual participant and the confidentiality of the data they provide. This project employed a number of data collection methods (transcribed taped interviews, questionnaires, logged online conversations, participants’ journals and field notes from observations) which all resulted in some form of text based document. These documents were imported into the qualitative research analysis software package NVivo. To ensure anonymity, a code was allocated for each participant and all other identifying information was removed from the document. All data provided by an individual was stored in the NVivo system using this number and a separate participant register was set up in a password protected Microsoft Word document. In reporting data verbatim within this thesis, either the participant’s code is used or a pseudonym has been created if it assists in clarifying the point being discussed.
Method of analysis

As previously discussed, the decision to use a multiple-case study approach in the design of this project was informed by a grounded theory approach to research. The grounded theory approach required not only an iterative data gathering method, but also a method of analysis that suited the iteratively informed design of each case. The method of analysis used was informed by Neuman’s model of Successive Approximation. Neuman’s (2000) model was particularly useful for this project because it is designed around an iterative research approach. The model involves the researcher starting with a set of questions, concepts or ideas to explore. An initial set of data is gathered and repeatedly analysed. From the analysis of this data the researcher builds an understanding of how well the data explores the issue at hand. The researcher then gathers more data and repeats the process, creating a richer sense and understanding of the issue at hand. This process assists in the development of new concepts from the data or revealing new links within the data.
While each pass through the data ‘is provisional or incomplete’ and the concepts may appear abstract, ‘they are rooted in the evidence and reflect the context’ of the overall data set (Neuman 2000, p. 427). Initial data sets are re-analysed in light of the insights gained from subsequent data sets and ‘over time, or after several iterations, a researcher moves from vague ideas and concrete details in the data toward a comprehensive analysis with generalizations’ (Neuman 2000, p. 426). Neuman’s idea that the results of early data analysis guide subsequent data collection was particularly relevant for this project because the choice of each case built on the problems and findings emerging from the previous case. As Neuman (2000, p. 419) suggests, this meant that the analysis of data in each study did not really constitute ‘a distinct final stage’ of the project, but rather represented an iterative process that has occurred across all phases of the research.

Figure 3 Neuman’s model of Successive Approximation
Case study site selection and data collection method design

The selection and design of the data collection methods for each case in this project was largely informed by the analysis of the previous case or cases. Generally, the selection of each case sought to provide a site that would either further clarify some aspect of the research questions or attempt to answer new questions raised by the previous case. For each of the three cases used in this study I detail the process for site selection, including why the site was chosen and the process followed to obtain access to the sample. In this study, each case relates to a specific course or program and, as such, a brief description of the course or program, the students themselves, and the mode of course or program delivery will be provided. Different data collection methods were chosen for each case to suit the particular environment being studied. This ensured the data gathered was relevant and also to guarantee that students’ participation in the project didn’t negatively affect their studies. The data collection methods for each case are discussed together with a rationale for the particular methods chosen, their appropriateness to the specific site, and the questions being explored in that case.

The First Case Study

Description of sample:

The first case study for this project involved a group of undergraduate students from the then School of Social Science and Planning at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia (it has subsequently become the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning). This group was chosen because they represented something unique in the research literature reviewed for this project at the time. They were undergraduate
students, studying on-campus that had chosen to complete one of their courses online. While there were many case studies of postgraduate students or undergraduate students studying their entire program online, this case provided a sample group of students that could reflect on both their on-campus and online learning experiences.

**Course:**

Contemporary Social Theory is a foundational undergraduate, social science course designed to introduce students to some of the central ideas at work in the twentieth century, and to examine their continuing influences into the twenty first century. During the study, this course was offered both on-campus and online. When delivered on-campus, this course used a traditional lecture - tutorial format. The course was offered within a number of the School of Social Science and Planning’s undergraduate programs.

**Students:**

The students studying the Contemporary Social Theory course online were chosen as the sample group because all students undertaking this course had also completed at least one semester of their program on-campus and, as such, could reflect on a variety of learning environments and their own social interactions. Unlike the majority of students enrolling in the on-campus course, most of the students enrolled in the online course were part-time students. Thirteen out of the fifteen students interviewed for this project were studying part-time.
**Course Design and Delivery Mode:**

As stated previously, students could either enrol in an on-campus version of this course or elect to complete the course online. Both courses used the same content and assessment. The course relevant to this study was delivered completely online. The course design was very rudimentary and basically consisted of a web page with digitised video recordings of the lectures, full text of the lectures, an email list and a discussion board. Students were expected to read or watch the lectures each week and respond to both group emails and questions placed in the discussion boards. The course had no specific elements designed to create or foster a sense of community amongst the students.

**Process for site selection:**

*Why this site-*

The site was selected for both practical and strategic reasons. Stake (1995, p. 4) suggests researchers select cases that are both accessible and ‘hospitable to outside inquiry’. This course was offered within my own university and I knew the course coordinator well enough to discuss my research with him and discuss the possibility of approaching his students. From a strategic point of view, this was, to me, the only accessible course which was to be offered online several times during the sample period and would remain largely unchanged during that time. This ensured that students interviewed from different iterations of the course had experienced a similar online environment. And finally, as discussed, the students enrolled in this course had also completed at least one semester of their program on-campus and therefore could comment on the online learning environment they had experienced in light of their on-
campus experiences. Students were interviewed after they had completed the Contemporary Social Theory course in the previous semester.

Process to obtain access to the sample-

Professor Rob Watts, the course coordinator, was provided with a copy of the research proposal and we discussed the possibility of using the Contemporary Social Theory online course as a case study for this research. He provided permission to approach the students via the preferred email addresses they had provided during the course.

Informed consent-

Students studying the online version of Contemporary Social Theory were invited to participate in the research via email. A copy of the plain language research statement and the consent form was sent to each student via email, along with my email address and mobile phone number. Students were encouraged to contact me either via email or on the phone if they had any questions. Several students made contact via telephone requesting more information. I responded to their questions, addressed their concerns and confirmed our conversations via follow-up emails. Of the twenty-nine students contacted, fifteen agreed to be interviewed. On meeting for the interviews students had another opportunity to ask questions about the project prior to signing the consent form. (Copies of the Plain Language Research Statement and the Consent Form can be found in the Appendix).
**Methods used for data collection**

Stake (1995, p. 64) reminds us that the ‘two principle uses of a case study are to obtain the description and interpretations of others’ and suggests that interviews are the qualitative researcher’s main tool for investigating the differing versions of reality experienced by respondents in a particular case. The decision to use semi-structured interviews in this project provided the flexibility required to maintain a general focus, while also allowing for the exploration of issues significant to the participants. As Bryman (2004, p. 113) suggests, semi-structured individual interviews provide the interviewer ‘some latitude to ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies’.

Although the interviews were not formally structured, I relied on a loose framework of questions. This framework explored three dimensions of their experiences. Firstly, students were asked to reflect on and explore positive learning experiences they had in on-campus learning environments. This included the relationships they had developed with other students and what affect those relationships had on their own study processes. The second section asked them to reflect on negative learning experiences they had in on-campus learning environments. The final section of the interview explored the students’ experiences in the Contemporary Social Theory course, in light of the previous discussions. These reflections included how students experienced the two learning environments as different ‘spaces’ in which to interact. (A copy of the question guide used during the interviews can be found in the Appendix) In all, fifteen interviews were conducted and they ranged in duration from 45 min to 1 hour 45 minutes. The interviews were taped and then professionally transcribed.
Representativeness of the sample-

While I wanted to explore the significance of community and how it developed for students, I did not set out to gather a representative sample of all online students’ experiences of community. However, the age range and gender mix of the fifteen participants loosely aligns with that of the demographic data of the possible sample group of twenty-nine students.

Date range for data collection-

Interviews commenced in March 2001 and were completed by October 2001.

The Second Case Study

As I will discuss later, it was clear from the analysis of the first case that while students strongly believed ‘community’ was significant, they had not experienced this in the online learning environment provided in the Contemporary Social Theory course. In consultation with my supervisor, it was decided to broaden the project to include examining the significance of the constructed online environment and whether or not the development of community could be supported or encouraged via changes in the virtual environment students encountered. Around this time I attended the 2nd International Conference on Technology in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Greece and met Dr Miguel Nunes and Ms Maggie McPherson from The University of Sheffield, UK. In casual conversation about our various research interests, Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson mentioned they had just developed a Virtual Social Space (VSS) to support the development of community in one of their online programs, the MA Information Technology Management.
Some six months later I contacted Dr Nunes to enquire about the students’ use of the VSS. Dr Nunes reported that while students had engaged with the VSS initially, the space had failed to create the sustained social interaction amongst students the staff had envisaged. This suggested an interesting opportunity because, while most of the current literature reported on the positive experiences of educators creating learning communities for their students, this site at the University of Sheffield provided an opportunity to explore why students had not used this type of space, or why it had not been appropriate for this group of postgraduate students.

**Description of sample**

**Program:**

The MA Information Technology Management is a part-time postgraduate program, offered by the Department of Information Studies at the University of Sheffield, in Britain. The program aimed to provide Information Technology and Information Systems Managers with the skills required to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice that often exists between professional systems developers and potential users within organisations. The program was intended to develop appropriate problem solving skills relevant to the implementation of Information Systems in the workplace. The program placed a strong emphasis on improving students’ knowledge, understanding and practical skills, as well as developing the confidence and competence required in their field of work. The programme consisted of four courses and included a work-based thesis. Each course ran for six months and required students to attend one all-day workshop each semester (Nunes and McPherson 2002).
Students:
The program mainly attracted students from the UK but also had enrolments from many parts of Europe including Norway, Sweden, Greece and Malta. Students were usually fulltime working professionals with a technological background who were seeking to improve their skills and qualifications relevant to the management of information technology related environments. Students were required to have a relevant undergraduate qualification or at least three years appropriate industry experience (Nunes and McPherson 2002).

Course Delivery Mode:
The MA in Information Technology Management was initially developed as a paper-based distance education program, but now made extensive use of the Internet to deliver the program. Several years earlier, the MA ITM program team had embarked on an action research project that sought to incrementally improve the program, while at the same time, transform it into a web-based program. While the program could be completed online, students were strongly advised to attend the one-day, on-campus workshops each semester. The online learning environment comprised course modules based in WebCT and the Virtual Social Space, which operated from a separate web page. A detailed description of the Virtual Social Space will be provided in chapter 4.

Process for site selection:

Why this site-
This site was selected because it provided two points of contrast with the first case study. Firstly, this was a postgraduate level program and as such provided the opportunity to compare the undergraduate students’ understanding of the significance of community from the first case with those of a postgraduate student cohort. Secondly, the MA ITM program development team had specifically designed the VSS to address problems of isolation and the lack of socialisation experienced by many online and distance students. Particularly of interest to this project, it was significant that, even though the VSS was developed in consultation with the students, the project had still failed to elicit student engagement.

Process to obtain access to the sample:

As discussed, after our initial meetings in Greece and further email correspondence over the next six months, Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson invited me to use the MA in Information Technology Management and the VSS as a case within this project. The MA ITM program team were concerned as to why the VSS had not been used by students and hoped that my investigation would shed light on any design issues. It was agreed that students from all three years of the program would be invited to participate.

Given that students in this program lived all over the UK and Europe, the process of accessing students to inform them about the project was complicated. Given the students’ lack of connection to the Virtual Social Space, contacting them via this space was not practical. The program team also advised me that UK privacy legislation prevented them from providing student contact details such as telephone numbers and email addresses to a third party. In discussions with the program team it
was clear that the majority of students would be attending their on-campus workshop day that semester. These days provided the best opportunity for me to spend some time with the students, talk about my research project and seek their permission to contact them via email. I discussed the possibility of arranging interviews with students on these days but was advised by the program team that the workshop days were tightly scheduled and that students had little free time during the day. So in order to make contact with the students, I attended the program’s first, second and third year workshops on Friday the 17th May 2002, Friday the 24th May 2002 and Friday 21st June 2002 respectively.

While at some level it could be seen as a bit extreme travelling from Australia to England to simply seek permission from students to contact them, Brennan et al (1999) and others highlight a common problem of low response rates for internet based research which can severely hamper the research process. Bryman (2004, p. 470) warns that ‘invitations to take part in research may be viewed as just another nuisance email’, so having the opportunity to spend the day with the students, sit in on their sessions, and chat over lunch and coffee breaks – really allowed me to create a connection with the students which I hoped would result in them feeling engaged enough in my research project to respond some months later when I contacted them via email.

**Informed consent**

During my session, on each of the workshop days, students in attendance were provided with a copy of the project’s research statement, explaining the place this case had within the overall project and a copy of a Contact Information Form. After
some discussion on the project and having answered any questions, students were advised that if they wanted to be contacted further about the research they should fill-in the contact details form and leave them on their way out to lunch. Across the three days, some thirty-four students provided contact details. (Copies of the Plain Language Research Statement for this case and the Contact Information Form are located in the Appendix).

Methods used for data collection-

This case provided some interesting challenges in designing appropriate qualitative data collection processes. Students were not contactable via their existing electronic communication channels because during the data collection phase of this case (June to September 2002), the University of Sheffield was unable to provide non-Sheffield University staff or students with access to their WebCT system and students were not using the Virtual Social Space. However, given these students lived in various parts of the UK and Europe, and I was based in Australia it made sense to explore the use of some form of electronic data collection method. The plain language research statement provided to students had advised them that they would either be sent a questionnaire via email or contacted to be interviewed in an online chat room. From discussions during the workshop days, students overwhelmingly requested an email questionnaire. I explored several chat facilities and spent some time talking with people in the publicly available chat spaces. It seemed clear to me that the nature of discussion within the chat environment, while intense, was often characterised by short interchanges rather than long considered responses. Given the students’
overwhelming desire to be contacted via email and their preference for an email based questionnaire, I settled on the use of a qualitative, open-ended questionnaire as the main data collection method.

Sarantakos suggests that questionnaires provide advantages over other methods of data collection. These include their uniformity, low cost of administration, quick results and the fact that respondents can complete them in their own time (Sarantakos 1995, p. 159). These points were particularly relevant for this project given that the students were resident in so many different locations, and most combined study with full-time jobs. Another advantage of an email-based questionnaire was that the completed data was received in electronic form and, as such, was easily imported into the Nivio qualitative data analysis software package used to analyse the data for the project.

Using Sarantakos (1995) as a guide, a seven-part questionnaire was designed that included sections gathering data on the respondents’ demographics; their personal learning style; [as defined by Honey and Mumford’s Learning Styles Questionnaire (Honey and Mumford 1986) which they had completed previously as part of their orientation to the MA ITM program]; the development of their social and learning support networks; their usage of the VSS on the whole; and three sections that related to each of the spaces created within the VSS (The Work Zone, The History Channel and The Social Circle). In the main the questionnaire used open-ended questions, with several fixed-alternative answer questions where appropriate. Included in the questionnaire was a section which sought students’ permission to contact them further should there be any clarifying questions arising from their responses. A draft copy of the survey was provided to Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson who helpfully provided
some copy edit advice to ensure the questionnaire would be more easily readable on screen. (A copy of the questionnaire is provided in the Appendix).

**Representativeness of the sample**

Sixteen out of thirty-four students responded to the email questionnaire representing a return rate of 47.06%. Of the thirty-four possible respondents, the sample of sixteen was representative in age, gender and yearly cohort distribution.

**Date range for data collection**

Initial survey data was collected from 30\textsuperscript{th} June 2002 to 20\textsuperscript{th} July 2002. Follow-up email correspondence with respondents was completed by 30\textsuperscript{th} September 2002.

**The Third Case Study**

Analysis of the first two case studies confirmed students believed the development of social learning support networks were important and most went to some trouble to create these types of learning support networks. The second case study also provided an insight into the sort of problems Online Learning Environment Developers might encounter in attempting to design usable, lived-in online social spaces. In contrast to the University of Sheffield experiences, teaching staff from the third case, the *Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace* course from RMIT University, reported they had developed an online learning environment that fostered a ‘strong sense of community’ and in which ‘students reported higher participation rates and greater involvement in the class as a community than for face-to-face classes’
(Chester and Gwynne 1998, p. 7). This course offered an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast aspects of the first two cases with an environment that seemed to genuinely support the development of social leaning support networks.

**Description of sample**

**Course:**

The *Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace* course is offered by the Department of Psychology and Disability Studies, RMIT University, as an elective for undergraduate students from a diverse range of disciplines. This course has been delivered in mixed-delivery mode (first 11 weeks off-campus, 12th week on-campus) since 1998. The online medium is particularly suited to the course as the objective of this course was to ‘explore, theoretically and experientially, the meanings of identity and community in cyberspace’ (Chester and Gwynne 1998, p. 4). The course design team initially delivered the course using the online learning environment, Firstclass. Now, however, the course is delivered via the virtual RMIT Tokyo Building in the saMOOrai MOO. A more detailed description of the MOO environment shall be provided in chapter 5. However, the design of the environment and the course allowed students to explore the concepts of identity and community in cyberspace for themselves and their fellow students by assuming an identity (including name, gender and species) of their choosing to operate as within the MOO.

A key aspect of this course was that student anonymity was maintained throughout their time in the MOO. None of the teaching staff, technical support staff or fellow students had any idea of a student’s name, gender, age, ethnic background or discipline area. The students completed a number of activities (via a journal) where they were
asked to reflect upon the identity they chose, and to explore and reflect on several issues raised during their online conferences. They were also required to make contributions to blackboards (discussion boards) set up in specific rooms within the MOO and attend (online) three real-time conferences held in the MOO. In the final week, the students met with the other members of the course for the first time and only then were their true identities revealed and discussed in light of their experiences in the MOO.

**Students:**

Until 2005, RMIT University required all undergraduates to enrol in two electives offered outside their discipline area as part of their program and, until 2004, these were generally referred to as ‘context curriculum courses’. Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace was one of these context curriculum electives and, as such, had a diverse mix of students from many different disciplines and programs. Usually, students were either in their second or third year of studies and many chose this program specifically because the first eleven weeks are online and this allowed them greater flexibility with the rest of their program.

**Course Design and Delivery Mode:**

This course operated solely online for the first eleven weeks and students were required to attend the final week on-campus. The online components of this course operated within a MOO that is a virtual, text-based online world. A more detailed discussion of MOOs in general and a description of the saMOOrai MOO in which this course operated will be provided in chapter 5. However, of relevance to this
methodology chapter, it is important to understand that MOO’s represent a three dimensional, real-time, virtual space in which people can meet, talk, create objects, and move things around. In a MOO, the first thing one does is create one’s own description of oneself. This description is what other people see (read) when you walk into a room in the MOO. In this course the students were required to create their identity and develop a character description that included their name, species, gender (if they had one), and a visual description of themselves. Although I used the alias Surfgrrl in the MOO, students were informed via email and in notices in the MOO of my true identity and why I was in the MOO.

**Process for site selection:**

*Why this site-*

As Stake (1995, p. 4) suggests, ‘Sometimes a “typical” case works well but often an unusual case helps illustrate matters we overlook in typical cases.’ The Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace course represented a very unusual case in the literature because while MOO’s had been used in an educational context in the early 1990’s (Bruckman 1994), the late 1990’s saw the introduction, and virtual universal adoption, of Course Management Systems such as WebCT and Blackboard within Australian universities (with only a few institutions opting to develop their own systems in-house). Certainly, the commercially available Course Management Systems effectively reduced the online environment student’s encounter to the four walls of a virtual classroom. Unlike a CMS based course, saMOOrai contained a virtual RMIT campus, with offices, corridors, conference rooms, cafes, courtyards and student dormitories. Unlike the MA Information Technology Management program’s Virtual Social Space (which was a separate social space created completely outside of
the students WebCT modules), the social spaces and opportunities for student engagement for those enrolled in this course all occurred in the online learning environment of the MOO.

Another significant advantage of this site was that this course would be offered in semester 2, 2002. This meant that I could design data collection methods that would operate while the course was running. This was significantly different from the first two cases where I had asked students to reflect on their experiences some time after they had completed their engagement with the learning environment.

The element of anonymity in the course design also added value in the choice of this site as a case. Unlike most online learning environments, where educators are striving to develop a level of trust between students based on them sharing personal information with each other, this course expressly forbade students from sharing personal information with each other that would reveal their identity. As well as this, because the students enrolling in this course came from a wide range of disciplines and from many different departments from within the university, it was highly unlikely that they would know each other. This ensured that the social contact that developed between the students was not based on prior association, but rather on the interactions that occurred directly within the MOO.

**Process to obtain access to the sample**

After reading one of their published papers, I contacted Ms Gillian Gwynne and Dr Andrea Chester to discuss their experiences with the Personal Identity and
Community in Cyberspace course and its possible use as a case for this study. The course had run several times since the publication of their first paper and they reported that the social contact and experience of community between students was the same for each time the course ran. A copy of the research proposal was provided and we discussed the possibility of using the course as a case for this study. Ms Gwynne and Dr Chester agreed that the course would be appropriate and suggested - after the initial face-to-face meeting - that our future meetings be held in saMOOrai as a way of giving me a feel for the environment.

_Informed consent-

This case provided the most challenging environment for obtaining informed consent because the anonymity of each student throughout the course was essential to his or her engagement in the set learning tasks. As such, the traditional process of contacting a potential research participant (providing them with a plain language research statement, answering any questions they have, and then if they want to participate, asking them to sign a consent form) could not occur as this would have resulted in students revealing their identity. This case used three forms of data collection – ethnographic observation, an email questionnaire and the journals students were writing as part of their assessment. In consultation with the teaching team of the course it was decided that while the ethnographic observation didn’t require students’ consent because the MOO was essentially public space (like a university campus) and students could choose to respond to the email questionnaire or not, access to their journals should only be with their consent.
Two strategies were used to inform students about the research and to ask them to participate; one via student emails and one within the MOO itself. Due to the course requirements that students’ identity be concealed, the course team had set up an email communication process where only Jan Elliot, an administrator within the Department of Psychology and Disability Studies, had access to both students’ names and their aliases. In consultation with the course team, Ms Elliot agreed to send the research statement to students’ emails and advise me which students wanted to participate by providing a list of the aliases for those students. In addition to this, I set up two notice boards in my office in the MOO; one with the research statement about the project; and the other for students to write their alias on if they were happy to provide access to their journals. Having both these systems worked well because students who had questions about the research often chatted to me about them in the MOO. If they wanted to participate they could either respond via email or walk over to my office in the MOO and add their name to the list.

Methods used for data collection-

This case provided a unique opportunity to actually be present in the online learning environment, while the course was running, and observe how students interacted within this social setting. This type of immersion within a ‘social setting in order to observe and listen with a view to gaining an appreciation of the culture of a social group’ Bryman (2004, p. 267) defines as ethnography. It could be argued that ethnography is particularly appropriate for interpretive researchers because, as Neuman suggests, the

‘goal of social research is to develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings. An interpretive
researcher wants to learn what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied, or how individuals experience life. The researcher does this by getting to know a particular social setting and see it from the point of view of those in it.’ (Neuman 2000, p. 71).

In this case, it was important to move beyond individual students’ recollections of community as a learner, into observing students’ interactions with each other, the teaching and technical staff, and the constructed environment they inhabited. As such, I spent between three hours and ten hours in the MOO everyday over the twelve weeks of the course and continued to visit the MOO regularly during the analysis of the data.

While ethnographic research traditionally conjures up images of a researcher heading off to visit a physical location, pen and paper in hand, ready to observe a particular community or organisation (Bryman 2004), in cyberspace there is no pen and paper, no physical location to visit. Hine (cited in Bryman 2004, p. 471) argues that once we conceive of the Internet as a place then ‘it is just a short journey to examination of communities in the form of online communities’. Bryman (2004, p. 471) goes on to provide several examples of cyberspace based research conducted using ‘virtual ethnography’ and suggests that like traditional, location-based ethnography, virtual ethnographers immerse themselves within a location and often have ‘a sense of participation in the lives of those being studied’. I chose to participate in various exercises in the MOO - including some of the conferences and taking part in activities and discussions with the students as a peer - specifically to foster this sense of my participation with the group and to achieve this level of immersion within the everyday life of the MOO.
Bryman notes that ethnographers typically rely on a number of data collection processes to ensure a rich understanding of the environment they observe. These include recording observations of phenomena or interactions in the form of field notes, clarifying observations or understandings via interviews with participants, and gathering further data via surveys (2004). This project has made use of all these methods of data collection including: field notes and logs of the conferences\(^4\) as a Participant-as-Observer (Bryman 2004) in the constructed social setting of the MOO, analysis of the students’ journals, and the use of a qualitative open-ended questionnaire to clarify some aspects of the data gathered previously.

**Representativeness of the sample**

As it was not possible to obtain demographic data on students, it is not possible to provide information on age or gender. However, all the students enrolled engaged in the research in some form. Of the fifteen students enrolled in the Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace course, twelve provided access to their journals. Eight responded to the email questionnaire. All those attending the three conferences were observed and over the 12-week duration of the course I had discussions in the MOO with every students enrolled.

\(^4\) There were three, one-hour conferences held in the MOO during the course. Students were expected to attend and were informed that the course team would log the sessions and make them available to students for reflection within their journals. A copy of one of these sessions is provided in the Appendix.
Date range for data collection-


Conclusion

I have outlined the research methodology that guided the design of this thesis. It has detailed the application of the grounded theory approach, which informed the iterative design of this project. Detailed descriptions of the various components of the research design have been provided, including the rationale for the use of a qualitative approach and a multiple-case study to explore the central research questions. Discussions detailing the choice of cases, the data collection methods, and the method of analysis used in the project were provided and discussed within the interpretive paradigm that informed this project.
Chapter 3: The First Case Study – ‘You don’t get a sense of belonging when you are online’

The RMIT Social Science students studying Contemporary Social Theory provided an excellent opportunity to explore this question of community or feeling part of a community for those studying on-campus and online, and to hear, from a student’s perspective, their feelings and ideas about the value of social connections. It provided an opportunity to explore these assumptions and understand this group of students’ perceptions of how social connections might form both on-campus and online. It also provided the opportunity to explore whether or not these social connections in some way benefited their learning processes or improved their engagement with each other within a social constructivist pedagogical framework.

My interviews initially used five broad questions:

1. Did students think community was important to them?

2. Had students experienced this sense of community in either the on-campus environment or in the online learning environment?

3. How did they believe community developed in the learning environment?

4. Did students believe these social networks supported their learning processes and if so, how?

Each interview started by providing students with an idea of the broad framework of the research project. Most interviews started with something similar to this statement:

Interviewer: Okay thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. Just a little about my project before we begin. My project is looking at students’ experience of community in the online learning environment. So I am going to ask you stuff
about the online course but I am also going to ask you to reflect on what your experiences have been in the face-to-face learning environment as well. So basically it’s trying to understand whether that experience of social space that you get when you come onto a campus or into university, whether or not we’re providing that in the online environment or not, whether it’s actually important or not. And how those experiences of feeling connected to other students or part of the group are important or not. By community what I am really talking about is the development of networks of support between learners, so sort of the friendship networks you develop, that sort of thing. OK so how many online courses have you done? (Interview CS9)

The structure of the rest of the interview was really designed to take the student on a reflective journey through their on-campus learning experiences and then into their recent online learning experiences. I asked students to reflect on this idea of community in relation to their own learning, whether they felt part of a community at RMIT, was it something that was important to them, and had they felt this kind of connection with fellow students within the online environment.

Using some of the key indicators from the literature on community and the development of a sense of community, I then asked the students questions about their interactions with fellow students in the course, how they engaged with the course content related material, and about their social engagement outside the classroom. I also asked them about any ongoing contact they had with their fellow students after completing their courses in both the online world and from their on-campus tutorials.

**Who was interviewed?**

By way of providing some overall sense of the identity of those interviewed, and how engaged they were in the online environment, it is useful to examine some of the demographic data gathered from this case. Of the fifteen students interviewed 75% were female. Over 85% of those interviewed were mature age students, two were in
their 40’s, six were in their 30’s, five were in their 20’s and only two were school leavers. Students interviewed for this case were all undergraduates, coming from 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years of various degree programs from the university community. Of the fifteen students interviewed thirteen were enrolled part-time. While this demographic spread was typical of undergraduate students choosing to study online in the School of Social Science and Planning, it is not typical of the School’s general undergraduate population who mainly studied fulltime - with the great majority of students being under twenty-five years of age. The sample of fifteen students was drawn from three iterations of the Contemporary Social Theory course.

When asked why they had chosen to complete this course online, students provided a variety of reasons. These included travel, time constraints and childcare. One student had a disability and studying online lessened the stress of getting around, one student was the main carer for their elderly parent, and others mentioned paid work commitments. Most suggested being able to do some of their courses online allowed them to complete another course in their degree (which was seen as equal quality) with the flexibility of doing it at a time of their choosing. For others, because of work commitments, having access to some courses online was the only way they could complete their degree in the time required. Interestingly, as well as naming travel issues, the fulltime students also reported they wanted more leisure time and felt the flexibility offered by an online course might provide this.

When asked how much time they had spent online for this course, whether it be engaging with materials, replying to discussion boards or emailing each other, every student went into the course materials at least three times a week for an hour - with
most spending more than an hour a day online in the course. Interestingly, while most of the students commented on how they thought choosing an online course would have been an easier option than studying face-to-face, they all believed they put in a lot more work than they would have in an on-campus class. Although most expected the online course to be easier than the on-campus class, fourteen of the fifteen students interviewed thought it was actually harder, but they clearly stated that the flexibility of the online environment plainly outweighed the extra work required in the course.

None of the fifteen students interviewed described themselves as highly IT literate, and, for most, it was their first foray into the online world other than email or the occasional browse of web pages. However, all reported that they now used the Internet more for all their other courses. All had an Internet connected PC at home, but one student had to use a computer on-campus due to some technical problems he could not resolve at home. Apart from one student who had completed two other online courses, for most this was their only online course experience. Thirteen students said they would choose to do another course online if it was available, while two said they would prefer to complete the rest of their degree on-campus.

In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss and outline the students’ reflections on the significance of community in both the on-campus and online learning environments. I have purposefully chosen to report on this first case in detail because the students’ reflections from this case set the directions for the other two cases. They also revealed new patterns of student engagement with the campus environment that were particularly relevant to the development of their social learning support
networks. Where possible, I have provided students’ reflections verbatim because often these quotes illustrate a process of iterative sense-making in which the student is engaged as they respond to the original question. In responding to one question, students will often follow a pattern of thought that takes their response beyond the boundaries of the original question, into a new area of understanding. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main data collection method because this approach gave students the type of space and flexibility to reflect on their experiences and take the interview, to some extent, into areas they thought were relevant. Analysis of the data required me to code and analyse students’ responses into both the original questions, and also into the new categories that students had communicated were important. Each interview was initially analysed soon after completion, and emerging questions were incorporated into subsequent interviews. Previous interviews were reanalysed once clear themes started to emerge. The interview transcripts numbered over five hundred pages and were a rich mix of students’ reflections and thoughts about their learning experiences both on-campus and online.

In discussing the findings from this case I have decided to use a question and answer format that effectively encapsulates the journey of the first case, and incorporates the important detours students created along the way. These six questions are:

1. Was there a sense of community (or social networks) on campus?
2. How did these social networks develop? (Inside class/ outside class)
3. Did students believe social networks supported their learning processes? If so, how?
4. Did the student experience a sense of community in the Online Learning Environment?
5. How did the Online Learning Environment, as a medium, affect how the student participated?

6. How did the student’s participation relate to the development of Social Learning Support Networks in the online environment?

The final section of this chapter will highlight the questions that emerged from this case and the implications for the rest of the project.

**Was there a sense of community (or social networks) on campus?**

As discussed, it became important to understand students’ current experiences of the on-campus environment before making assumptions about how they might interact in the online environment. The literature suggested that trust was important both for the development of community and for learning. Authors such as Palloff and Pratt (1999), Tinto (1994) and others who argue for high levels of student interaction and the development of learning communities have adopted social constructivist pedagogies. Social constructivist pedagogies claim that students require a social space to reflect and contextualise knowledge through dialogue with each other, i.e. a social space within the meaning of people coming together versus private space. It is within this context of a ‘learning community’ that proponents of a social constructivist approach to learning suggest that it is the trust engendered within the group environment that provides a student with both the opportunity and the environment to risk their perceptions, reflect on their relevance, and realign their understandings of an issue through dialogue. In a sense, students make meaning through their discussions with each other. It was important, therefore, to understand how these trust relationships
developed in the on-campus learning environment and to explore how students might translate these processes into the online learning environment. It would seem that if the current adoption of a social constructivist approach to learning was valid, then students would articulate many of the attributes associated with this approach when asked to reflect on their own positive learning experiences.

It is certain that the students interviewed for this case confirmed much of the current thinking about the value of using constructivist pedagogies and the value of learning communities for tertiary undergraduate students. When asked to reflect on their on-campus learning experiences, many students clearly articulated attributes that could easily be associated with the Teaching and Learning quality improvement agendas currently operating in many Australian universities. These comments included talking about the value of highly interactive learning environments, the importance of an aligned curriculum, the importance of building trust with each other and the significance of feeling part of their university community. In effect, students suggested there was a snowballing affect whereby when a student had a sense of connection with others in their course, this often provided the trust that encouraged them to participate in discussions. This trust, in turn, created a greater sense of connection with each other and resulted in them wanting to participate more and a desire to have classes that were structured in a way that encouraged, and indeed required, this type of participation.

Positive on-campus learning experiences were typically described in very active terms; the tutorial as ‘going off’ (Cs13) or it being a ‘real buzz’ (Cs4). One student actually stated that they often came away from a class feeling ‘good socially and good
in the sense that everyone gets the big picture on things, rather than the one, like just reading the material.’ (Cs7) Another student echoed these sentiments when asked to describe a good tutorial experience - ‘oh that is easy, one where people come out feeling that they have learnt something ... you know you have learnt something or sometimes even that you have helped someone else learn something’ (CS13). These last two comments confirm some of the findings from Tinto’s (2000) U.S research discussed in the literature review, particularly that collaborative learning experiences engender in students a greater feeling of responsibility for their fellow students’ progress.

When asked to describe their best on-campus learning experiences, only one student consistently described a preference for what is described by Biggs (1999) and others as a ‘transmission mode’ learning environment. The other fourteen students described how they preferred highly interactive learning environments. The following comments are typical and illustrate how the students often situated their interactions within the learning process:

CS8: Yeah I guess that the best one or the tutes I’ve enjoyed most are the ones that have a bit of fiery discussions, a bit of debate happening between them and hearing peoples alternative points of view and stuff.

CS9: Yeah I think it is that, that I really like it when you feel you have been talking with each other and you come out thinking you have learnt something or confirmed something and you have sort of done that as a group. It doesn’t hurt if you get to laugh a bit on the way either.

CS6: Yeah it was good. I enjoyed the discussion part, the tutorial part a lot more than straight lectures I guess. Because at least you can bounce ideas off each other and it’s particularly important in the more ... the less black and white subjects.

CS12: Well of course interaction’s really important, it is the key really to getting to know something, you know being able to go check out if you have really understood a reading or whatever, because some of them are pretty over the top. But I think it is not just interaction for interactions sake sort of
thing, like I like it to stay focused on the subject at hand. I find it really frustrating when the tutor starts talking about the football or whatever and then people join in and you find half the tute has talked about something that is irrelevant to the course.

CS14: Well I think those tutorials that require you to actually do something like a debate or you have to get together in a small group and work out how what you looking at relates to your life. I really like that sort of stuff, where you relate your own life to a particular thing. It makes it really real and I think you understand it better. Like someone can tell you something, but it is only when you have to really think about it and go yeah I understand this or no I don’t understand this, can you explain it to me a bit more, that you know you’ve got it or not.

One of the mature-age students provided a particularly insightful response about the value of sharing her own life history in the context of the course she was studying. This comment was in the context of being asked ‘What was the best thing about studying on-campus?’

CS4: Interaction. Because I am much older, and they are like Joey, my eldest son’s age, it is interaction and that they also got to see what it is a bit like not being 18 or 19. It's like their history is my past, if you know what I mean. And I remember one time we did the time line, where in the time line would you like to be, now for them it was a big buzz seeing the sixties, but I was already you know (laughter) I would learn from them as well, it was the interaction that was very important, it was what I enjoyed.

One second-year mature-age student talked in a more holistic sense about what typified a good learning experience. The following quote, although long, demonstrates her thinking about the overall design of the program, the alignment of curriculum, and her level of engagement with other students. She saw all of these elements as being important in the development of a good learning environment:
CS15: Ummm ... well I guess that, like a good learning experience would have been a workshop rather than a tute for me and I guess it wouldn’t have been an individual session but rather a whole course. I might even go as far as to say program really, you know how the whole thing is designed and that

Interviewer: Right so give me a bit more detail at both that sort of macro program level and the micro course level. Like what actually happens in class and that

CS15: Well I guess at a program level you sort of want everything to hang together and to make sense, at a course level you want the weekly sessions to sort of build on each other and not be just sort of isolated glimpses of something

Interviewer: Like you mean you want each week to sort of relate to the overall course subject and you want those links to be explicit or

CS15: Yes that is it, I want to know from the beginning what we are doing and why we are doing it. I think some lecturers forget that we don’t actually know all this stuff and you see them go off in their own little world with stuff and they get really excited about it, and you think so what does that have to do with anything you know. So yeah I want to understand why we are learning what we are learning; as much as what we are learning - if that makes sense

Interviewer: Absolutely yeah of course. So you mentioned about workshops being good or that you had some that were better than others at least, can you talk about what made them good or detail the aspects that you thought made for a good learning environment or whatever

CS15: I guess I am thinking about a subject I did last year where we had a lecture but we had this 2-hour workshop each week as well. In the workshop we sort of built on stuff each week and not only did we work on the, the subject or the point of that week if you know what I mean, but we also then integrated that into our assignment sort of thing. So each week, we sort of built up our assignment, it is not that we did it all in class or whatever but it is just that we, at the end of every week, if you did some work on the thing you had to hand in as well you could just see all the pieces falling into place

Interviewer: Right

CS15: and I think during those workshops people really got to explore the issue we were looking at. Like there was the time and space to sort of talk about it and understand it better

Interviewer: so that talking about it and understanding it, can you describe this a bit further

CS15: mmmm I guess it comes down to not just taking the information at face value but actually getting a chance to see how it is relevant to your own life
On the other hand, when students described learning experiences that were less positive, they commented on the lack of connection with other students, on the lack of discussions within the classroom and, typically, that the learning experience was ‘flat’ (Cs2) or ‘lacked energy’ (Cs13). Students attributed this to a range of factors like the design of the learning experience, the fact that they did not know anyone in the class, or that the teacher spoke all the time and didn’t let the students talk or contribute in their own time. The following comments from students illustrate some of these factors and demonstrate the significance of the design of workshop or tutorial experiences in fostering an interactive, engaging learning environment:

CS9: I hate those tutes that just end up being extensions of the lectures ... when the tutor just talks for the hour and you think ... well I wonder if they care what I think.

CS5: We sat there and facing the front of the class while the tutor talks for an hour and a half and there was no interaction. I mean if you go to the workshops, they are a necessary evil, you have to go but they don’t all have to be just a continuation of a lecture, which is what I’ve had previously. And I mean you just sit there and you switch off really or you just don't go, which is a bad thing but you just loose interest...

CS14: Yeah of course but I have been in a tutorial where I knew a lot of the people, and like usually most of these guys read for each tute, like they at least read something and we had this woman for, oh I can’t even remember her or the subject name now, anyway I could see it happen over the semester. In the first few weeks most people would turn up at the tutorials with their reading and they would have read something and she would just launch into this 50 min mini lecture. I swear by the end of about week 6 people stopped even bringing their reading pack to tute. I remember talking to a few people about it and their response was, well what is the point [of reading it] lets face it we aren’t going to have to say anything. One even said out right, I never do the reading for this subject now because we have the lecture and then the tutorial and what is the point of reading something so they can just tell it to you all over again.

CS13: well [the tutor] has prepared to fill up all the time and there isn’t much time for us to talk, I think it is only when you actually have to talk about what you know that you can really be certain that you understand what the subject is about. Maybe that is because I am from Malaysia I don’t know but I have talked to my girlfriend about it when we have had bad tutes and she agrees. When you have to talk about it you know you know it then.
From analysis of both the positive and negative learning experiences it was clear that what differentiated these experiences for the students was the sense of connection they felt, or were able to develop with each other, and the subsequent engagement they felt encouraged in. The following two quotes illustrate this well. The first student is describing a sense of elation from her interaction with others, even though she has been taken out of her comfort zone. The second student is describing a situation where she clearly felt isolated and unlikely to develop the confidence to challenge others or discuss things she is unclear about.

**CS15:** Yeah I guess, but like not everything is directly relevant right, but if it is in the course, it should somehow be part of what you are hoping to do in your job or whatever. But in talking about it with the other people in your group or whatever you, it can take your mind in other directions. You know often someone will share something about their life or whatever, or a thought and suddenly pow the light goes on in your own head. Like I reckon some of those things you just would never get from just reading about stuff.

**~:*~**

**CS5:** So I guess when you had to work in groups you get to know everybody and dynamics came out and so forth, so that was okay. But when you’re in that tute and you’re there as a single person you go away, you work on your assignment, you come back and then ... it just doesn’t work well not for me because I’ll just sit there, I won’t talk for two hours. And when I do talk I go bright red and I’ll think ... that was embarrassing I’m not going to do that again for a while.

Students had clearly described that their positive learning interactions contained high levels of interaction and engagement. Was this, then, community? Did they make connections outside the classroom? Did they feel part of a community? Students had a mixed response to this question. Some students clearly linked the idea of ‘community’ with their capacity to make friends and engage socially. Typically, these students talked about connections that extended beyond the prescribed learning space:

**CS1:** In a face-to-face environment? Yeah definitely. I made lots of friends through face to face...
Interviewer: And those connections that you’ve made with those people. How did that happen? You know if you think of it you’re meeting these people in lectures and tutorials and whatever...

CS1: Oh okay, usually getting along in class. Everyone in my particular course is very sociable type people and everyone gets along. So it’s been very easy to make friends. It hasn’t been like, you know, do you want to go out afterwards, we just go out afterwards, it’s just a good environment.

Interviewer: Do you usually catch up with people in your face-to-face tutorials?

CS9: Yeah there are a few of us now who try to catch up, well it isn’t planned or anything it just sort of happens, you know you find out you are coming in on the same day or you are going to be here or whatever or some times you just bump into people. It has been funny this year coming back because it has been really exciting about connecting up with people I didn’t see over summer again.

Some students clearly identified themselves as belonging to a ‘university community’.

This identification was closely linked to the geographical or identity-based concepts of community described by Kenny (1994), such as the geography of the campus or the identity of being a student:

CS4: the physical environment is very important, the umm, going to the lectures going to, communicating one to one, being in the tutorials with them umm you know having the discussions, the group discussions and whatever goes round, that you are having the one-to-one contact or the group contact umm, the physical in the sense of the library is here, umm the buildings are here. It is a community and it is an identification like when you say to somebody ‘where are you - oh I'm at RMIT’ you are part of a community

Interviewer: So would you see yourself as being a member of a community?

CS7: Yeah if community is like friends at uni. Is that what you mean?

Interviewer: Well it might mean all sorts of things and really that’s what I’m interested in, things about the community. In the end people sort of define it themselves, is whether or not they feel a part of the community or not. But I guess it’s around whether or not you feel, that you feel part of a community in the connections that you have with those people.

CS7: Well I definitely I love this place, I love RMIT and, like speaking to friends from other universities they, it’s a very much isolated campus with other campuses but because of the way this particular uni. is spread out in different, you know different buildings and stuff it’s...
Interviewer: So you really like the physical space as well?

CS7: Yeah yeah and just the availability of like everything in the city. You can go to a café with someone and you can choose a different café everyday but if you’re in the one location you’d have one café to go to.

Interviewer: So do you think that physical space stuff is really important in that feeling of connection with other people?

CS7: Yes and also the networking and it’s good walking into a building and knowing everyone so that community thing is there and yeah it’s a good thing. And because it works I really like it I wouldn’t want to give that up to try something else. Even though the Internet might work for something else, this is working really well.

Others, due to their part-time enrolment and the many pressures of busy lives, believed community occurred on campus, but that they didn’t always feel part of it. One student comments on that level of connection from first year when she was full-time, before reflecting on how being part-time significantly changed her experience:

CS6: I certainly found that (sense of community), I actually did my first year of study full-time and in full-time study there is definitely that sort of connection. Almost … being the first year it was, I guess very similar to a continuation of high school or secondary education where you tend to be with the one class. Doing it part-time from then on, you certainly see a different aspect to it, where you’re basically forming relationships every year with a different group of people. Actually you almost get good at the contact with someone where you know you’re only going to a certain point or period of time and after you sort of jump straight into the sort of level...

Interviewer: The business that you need to deal with.

CS6: Yeah it’s almost like a business relationship that’s what it basically almost becomes. Yeah there is certainly a difference between how the tutorial acts as a group or as a community between part-time and full-time, it’s very distinct.

Other students describe a very strategic, and highly utilitarian approach to developing connections with fellow students. This student starts off discussing community as something others were experiencing, but she clearly starts to recognise the value of
developing connections with fellow students that will extend beyond her university years:

CS8: (Re community) I think it definitely exists. It exists because you see peers, I guess I consider myself a bit of an outsider and that, you see that people develop friendships and communities and know what’s going on, like caught up with so and so, at the such and such, the other day. So they know where it’s happening. But from my point of view I don’t feel like I’m a student at all you know I’m there to complete a degree but I’m not necessarily part of a student community. It’s interesting because my partner keeps saying you know I’d really wished you’d studied when you where 19 so that you could have been a part of that. So I think it’s, well for him, it was definitely a big thing he was involved in Melbourne Uni weird and wonderful groups. …
I’m interested in next year being my final year I guess, I’d like to build some networks because then those students will be entering the workforce, which is my domain. And then hopefully we might, I guess, they may become ongoing relationships because they’ll be looking for people who are in the industry. … I’d be actively looking for it and I’d be interested in keeping in touch with people more so next year than in previous years. … if I do find anyone that I get along well with then I’d be happy to maintain the relationship past or to build on that. And I think that the subjects that I’ve got coming up are very, … more attractive subjects again next year, so they do that purposefully so they do build those connections and networks.

When community was couched in terms of developing what I am calling Social Learning Support Networks, all those interviewed discussed the significance of these types of connections and the importance of ‘knowing’ someone else in the course. This even included the student who preferred transmission mode learning environments. When community was discussed in these terms, students clearly believed having these types of connections with each other were beneficial. It was important to explore why students felt so strongly about making these sorts of connections, which they didn’t describe so much as friendships as just ‘knowing’ other people - and to understand how these connections developed.
**How did these social networks develop?**

When asked to explore this idea of ‘knowing’ or ‘not knowing’ their fellow students and how that sense of connection might form with another student, the respondents revealed a pattern of engagement with each other which was largely initiated or formed outside the classroom setting. Most believed it was a complex thing that involved a multitude of factors. When respondents where asked to recall how they developed connections with people they were studying with, it became evident that there were three possible factors or processes at work:

- connections developed as part of working in a group (either in the classroom or externally);
- connections developed as the result of incidental or informal meetings with other students;
- connections developed when support or assistance was provided from one student to another.

Students suggested that the first of these factors – that of relating to working in a group - could be important in the development of a sense of connection between students. Typically, students reported that while working in a group context they tended to share more of their personal lives ‘by the way’ and this became the basis of a shared connection with each other. This sharing of personal information often resulted in the students making connections with each other for personal or academic support outside the classroom. This would seem to confirm the significance Brown et al (1989) places on the role of group work in the development of trust between students and the subsequent importance of trust in the learning process. Brown et al
(1989, p. 40) suggests learning becomes ‘a process of enculturating that is supported in part through social interaction and the circulation of narrative’. In this process ‘groups of practitioners are particularly important, for it is only within groups that social interaction and conversation can take place’ (Brown et al 1989, p. 40).

Certainly, students talked about how important trust was in their willingness to engage in the planned learning activities:

CS15: yeah I think if you have the time and there is enough trust there between people then generally, and I guess if people are actually there to learn, you know like they are actually doing the readings and stuff and getting into it, I think most people who spend the time going to tutes and workshops and stuff actually want to have a good time and will put in, in the right circumstances

CS5: This one worked well because you get to actually work in groups and you had to communicate with your group and in fact actually work outside the tutorial as well. That was okay, that was it worked for me eventually once you get to know people and start trusting them that when you put your opinion forward you’re not going to get laughed at, not that you would anyway but still you have got to build that trust.

However, students also suggest that the physical environment provided by being on-campus can also contribute significantly to the development of these trust relationships. Students reported that the combination of just “bumping into” one another on campus and the possibility of providing assistance to a fellow student often resulted in the development of an ongoing relationship between the students. What characterised the physical meeting up of two students was the often-unplanned nature of these meetings. They described running into a fellow student in the library or at Druids (a local café) or in the corridor while waiting for class to start. Further, there often seemed to be some form of assistance given from one student to another, often related to academic matters but also sometimes of a personal nature. The following excerpt is one example of how students described these factors at work:
CS15: One class I have had this year, I come from work straight here and usually I just go sit on the floor outside the room, anyway there were a couple of us in the same boat who use to arrive about quarter of an hour before class started. It varied a bit who was there but by about week 3 or 4 I realised this one girl was usually there when I was and you know you would sort of look and smile and that as you do. Anyway one day I bumped into her the library and we sort of joked about things, I can’t remember what now anyway I guess in those little moments you sort of get a sense of someone or whatever, like you sort of know them a bit. Anyway a week later when we were in class we had to form into groups to do something together and I am now part-time and I hate that moment a bit now because other people in the class often know each other and I am the one that doesn’t know anyone. Anyway I looked around and Susie, the woman I met in the library, was talking to a couple of people she knew and she looked at me and smiled and waved to come over and join them. Like I just don’t think that would have happened if I hadn’t sort of made that connection with her in the library.

Interviewer: so that unexpected or unplanned meeting in the library sort of helped out or smoothed the way for something to happen in class

CS15: yeah like I actually got to know Susie quite well in that class and I know if we were in the same tute again that there would be that connection there again between us

The above extract reveals two factors at work. Firstly, this student spends time with the other student outside the classroom in the library. Secondly, the connection they make in those few short meetings provides the basis of an acquaintanceship that goes on to support the student in the classroom. Later in the interview, this student identifies how these chance meetings on campus provide opportunities to build a connection with another student and how he feels he could draw on that relationship to support his learning.

CS15: I guess the other thing is spending time with people outside of class, when I think about it, that is where you really sort of get to know more about people and that sort of builds the foundations of that trust stuff in class I guess

Interviewer: so how does that happen that you spend more time with someone out of class, how do those connections happen

CS15: well I guess often they just sort of happen by accident, you know you meet people or bump into them or whatever and something happens, maybe you help someone out or they help you out and you sort of go on from there. It is not a planned thing or whatever I think it just happens
Interviewer: so can you describe something like this happening with yourself

CS15: I knew you would ask that mmmm yeah I can think of a couple of examples from my own life. I remember last year I was at Druids [coffee shop] and this guy from class was buying a coffee and he was 20c short, I recognised him from my tute and I just put the 20c on the counter and smiled at him. Like I still don’t really know his name but whenever we see each other we smile and nod and in that tute there was a couple of times where there was an interaction in class and you just had this sense that there was something there more than before.

Interviewer: did you go onto to develop a friendship with him

CS15: no not really like we don’t see each other outside of uni or whatever, but like I know I could ask a favour of him if I had to or whatever, like if I need someone to get the notes for me or something or I wasn’t sure what to do about something and he was there I would feel fine about asking him

These extracts reveal the complex and often serendipitous nature of how students build trust between each other. What is interesting about this extract is the fact that this student doesn’t go on to develop a friendship with the other student, nor does he know his name, but he does feel that he could ask him for a favour relating to his work if the need arose. Certainly, the role of the physical space of the campus, how students interacted in that space and how this related to their identity and confidence as students was very clear. The following comments from students explore this well and show some of the nuances of their relationships with each other and the campus.

Interviewer: does that feel important, that running into people and saying hi stuff

CS10: I guess it makes me feel like I am here or whatever, like I know people, I mean I remember my first few weeks here you know and you walk around campus with your head down cause you just don’t know anyone, and you sort of like, you don’t feel lonely but you sort of come here do something and go

Interviewer: you don’t hang round

CS10: no. I don’t know, then you get to know people and you click with some and I don’t know you just start to hang round more and like you know you walk round campus with your head up because when you see someone you know, even if you just smile it is sort of a good feeling or whatever. Like sometimes you don’t even know their name but you have seen them in your class or whatever and you just smile and nod.
Clearly, students were able to say that they developed connections with each other in a variety of ways. As expected from the literature, students described how the structured or planned interactions in class helped develop a sense of trust with each other and facilitated the development of social connections. Importantly students also described how incidental and informal meetings outside of the classroom could contribute to them getting to know each other and developing levels of trust. The third factor that could also influence the development of these types of connections was providing unexpected support or assistance to another student. While previous discussions on the development of learning communities has engaged with what happens in the classroom, these students were clearly situating their lived student experience on the campus, and in the coffee shops, library and hallways.

While students had clearly talked about their preference for social constructivist learning environments and had provided insights into the development of social connections on campus, I was still keen to explore if students could describe why
these social connections were important or how they might actually support their learning processes.

**Did students believe social networks supported their learning processes? If so how?**

In asking students to explore how these various sorts of social connections - from friendships to acquaintanceships - might support their learning processes, most provided concrete examples that spanned both inside and outside the classroom. For some this type of support was present in the classroom and an extension of the trust and connection they had developed during the course:

*CS4: umm I think, umm you get to feel empathy with the people in your tutorial. For example, okay you are in your little groups and you get to know everybody and when the pieces come back and you know 'how did you go' and 'how did you go', 'ah fantastic' or 'don't worry do it again'. I remember one time a kid ummm didn't do so well but he had an option of redoing it or something, you know resubmitting. And I said to him, you know the mum coming out, 'don't be a fool do it' ... it was just, you know everybody is at their most vulnerable*

For others there was a clear sense of emotional support and a shared journey that extended beyond the classroom:

*CS12: well I guess it is just about having someone to talk to that understands what you are going through, ummm someone else that might understand the assignment and what you have to do and stuff. Ummm but I guess it is sort of more than that too, it is, like it is hard to describe it is also about you all being uni students or something. You know there is something there between you. Like even about other things like one of my friends got married over Christmas and the other day we were talking about how hard it is to get access to the computer at home because our husbands are always on it (laughter) you know. We sort of had a good laugh about it both agreed we would try something out and report back to each other*

*Interviewer: right right so covert operation ‘reclaim PC’ has begun (laughter)*

*CS12: exactly (laughter)*
Interviewer: hope it succeeds

CS12: yeah so stuff like that. We sort of each just know what the other is going through, not just with study but with other things as well.

Others, still talked of a familiarity that could result in very practical forms of support. In the next two excerpts the students detail how, in practice, the value of knowing someone could assist them in either clarifying content, working on their assessment or just getting someone to cover for them if they were away.

CS1: I think it is important to bond with a couple in your class, so you have got someone you can say ‘what do you think?’ and they can say it back. ... it’s a good way to bounce ideas back and forth.

CS13: oh okay. Yeah, the previous week I had worked with Peter and Rick for the first time on a group thing in the tute, then about two days later I was in the library and I heard someone say ‘you meet the strangest people in this library’. The funny thing is this was not a term I was familiar with and I thought Rick was saying something bad, but his face didn’t look bad. I said ‘I am sorry I don’t understand’ then he explained this is an Australian way of saying ‘hello’. Anyway we just started talking and then Rick said he was going to meet Peter to talk about the assignment for the subject and asked me to join them.

Interviewer: great and you did

CS13: yeah we sat at Druids, ate chips and talked about the assignment.

For some students, the value of knowing a fellow student was starting to shape their course choices in later years. The student below not only details how social learning support networks practically benefits her, but also suggests the opportunity for these types of connections will shape her choices in the future.

Interviewer: so can I just explore this a bit more. Those connections you have with people here on campus, how important are they to you, like are they just important socially or how do they connect into your study

CS9: well I don’t know ... like it is important to know people as well, like to have a coffee with and that but also ... like they are really important, it is important to know people so you can check things out. If you don’t understand something or you want to check out something, you talk to other people first
Interviewer: other students

CS9: yeah like you can’t always find your tutor or you feel silly asking them, so you ask someone else in your class first.

Interviewer: so you would ask about your assignments and stuff

CS9: yeah or favours, like copies of handouts and stuff. I have studied in one class, an elective, and I didn’t know anyone and I missed a couple of classes because of work and I never really got into it and I didn’t have anyone to talk about to ... it was really hard compared to another class where I knew a couple of people.

Interviewer: would knowing someone else was doing a course influence you into taking it

CS9: yeah next year I have already worked out with my friends who is doing what ... look it just makes everything easier so why not choose those ones

As previously mentioned, for those students studying part-time, many felt that simply having developed the level of connection where you would know someone on sight, would be enough to smooth over that awkward moment for many part-time students, when they are asked to form a group in a class full of people they don’t really know.

Interviewer: yeah and that would be someone you had already had some connection with or

CS4: yes but not always a big connection, like it might be just that you know their face from class or whatever, you know I think ... once I make eye contact with someone I feel fine about going up to them. You know it is like there are so many people here and when I see a familiar face I just go phew ‘Hi’. And they are the ones who you look at in class, you know when you need to buddy up or get into a group or whatever

Having established an understanding of the significance of community, how it might develop, and how these social networks might support learning in the on-campus environment, students were now asked to reflect on their online learning experiences.
Did the student experience this sense of community in the Online Learning Environment?

Students clearly felt that studying online was completely different to their on-campus experiences. While thirteen of those interviewed plainly indicated they would do another course online, many talked about how disappointed they were at the lack of interaction between students and the lack of personal sharing of information that might enable them to get to know each other. The following reflections from students give both a sense of their isolation and to some extent their anxiety about not really being sure of ‘how to be’ in this environment.

CS14: no it felt very much like I was studying on my own, although I also knew other people were out there studying on their own too. I guess if we were doing a number of courses together, like online, you would work harder at getting connected to people. Like if the school had a whole lot of online courses you could choose then I think the students who went down that path would probably set up some sort of online group or whatever

CS2: I thought it would be a bit more relaxed and there would be a bit more discussion around ‘well how are you going with this’ and ‘what sort of idea is that’ but it was really strictly digesting the lecture material and, I’m not saying that it couldn’t have been flexible but for some reason you just can’t get up to that, I think we were all a bit tense about going on line or something I don’t know

This lack of personal sharing or lack of connection often resulted in students making comments about not really knowing others. The following comments link this student’s experience back to feeling part of a community, and she goes on to reflect on the anonymity that many felt typified their experience of the online environment.

CS4: I don’t think you get the sense of belonging when you are online, I mean you do your work, and you do what you need to do but you don’t get the sense of belonging. I mean I could be doing it in Wagga Wagga or whatever, it doesn't matter where I am if I do something online. To make the choice that you are a RMIT student or whatever or Monash or whatever, it is a community. And I don't feel you get that sense of community and part of being a community is interaction between fellow students, the tutor, the lecturer. And the interaction you get online, you have got it but it is not, how would I put it...
ahh I would do lots in depth and I don't feel it, it's not spontaneous and umm it is a bit dry.

Interviewer: mmm yep I see

CS4: Like online - I could be having coffee and the person sitting next door, next to me, who I have been having a twenty-minute discussion every night and I have no idea who he is, or she is.

Many students used their on-campus experiences as a way of highlighting the differences they experienced in the online environment. Even though the following student has been part-time for some years and had previously commented on his ability to develop 13-week type relationships that supported him during his on-campus studies, he found the online learning environment just didn’t support this sort of incidental contact:

CS6: Coming from a bit of a different background when you’re a part-time student most years, it’s been a different group of people that I do each subject with. And even in that environment you still tend to socialize for 10 minutes before and 10 minutes after and eventually by the end of the semester you might go out after your last subject together for a bite to eat or a drink together or something like that. So yeah certainly there is a difference there.

Interviewer: That didn’t happen in the on line environment?

CS6: No not at all, you just don’t get to know people.

Some of these students had studied in the same online course so it was interesting when they commented on a fellow student who was also interviewed for this thesis. Respondent CS10 was particularly positive about the need for more online courses in the hope it would reduce her number of on-campus hours. Yet she had also talked about the value of having connections with people who could provide support. In discussing her experiences online, I asked her if she had developed similar connections with students online to those she had discussed from her on-campus experiences. While she reflected on how different it was, she also recognised there
was still the possibility for individual people to initiate the kind of interaction that could lead to people knowing each other either through their personal sharing of information or via identity cues in the written text. The woman she is referring to here is respondent CS4.

*Interviewer:* did you think you sort of got a sense of people from the discussion board stuff

*CS10:* not really like because we just talked about the course each week, like we didn’t really share much about ourselves, oh except for that woman, you know the one whose son put something up one week

*Interviewer:* yeah I know who you mean

*CS10:* yeah like I think she is middle aged or whatever she always mentioned stuff about her life and that so of all of them, I guess I got to know more about her. I guess the other thing was that you could tell some of the Asian or whatever students cause they, sometimes it was like they wrote with an accent or something I don’t know how to describe it..umm

*Interviewer:* you mean their sentence construction was different

*CS10:* yeah that was it, so you could tell they weren’t Australian anyway

The online courses these students enrolled in were very rudimentary and had no specific elements designed to create or foster a sense of community. As such, many students talked about elements they believed would help create this sense of connection with each other when talking about their online experiences. It was clear that they felt certain aspects of the medium restricted them from engaging in the same manner they felt they would have in the on-campus learning environment, while other aspects meant they engaged more.
How did the Online Learning Environment as a medium affect how the student participated?

Online learning environments can include images, audio and video, but for the most part they still rely heavily on text. Unlike face-to-face learning environments that still rely on the spoken word for much of the day-to-day interaction between both students and teaching staff, online environments require all communication to be relayed via text. When students talked about their learning experiences it became clear that many of their comments related to this need to translate how they would be, as students, in the face-to-face world and in the online world. In discussing how the medium of the online learning environment affected student participation and therefore their sense of connection with each other, it is useful to talk about four separate but interrelated aspects of the environment:

- The discussion boards;
- The implications of the written medium on students participation;
- The chat environment; and
- Issues of anonymity and identity inherent in the design of the courses in which they were engaged.

These four elements underpin the same common themes to emerge from students as they discussed their online learning experiences. These four elements are interrelated because often students detailed a connection between the particular attributes of the tools being used (synchronous or asynchronous) and the flow-on effect it had on how they, as students, engaged with each other.
Interestingly, when students reflected on their experiences in the online learning environment, they spoke in similar terms about online discussion groups as either working well or not. They attributed their positive experiences to students’ willingness to participate and commented on the different participation styles engendered within the two common engagement tools used in online learning environments – namely, chat rooms and discussion boards. It was clear that these two different tools provided very different learning spaces for students to engage in. Each of these aspects had both positive and negative implications for students’ participation and it is not possible to suggest that any single element alone could enhance overall student participation.

**Discussion boards**

The key benefit of using discussion boards is best summed up by the way that these are not time dependant (that is they are asynchronous). Asynchronous tools such as discussion boards (also called threaded discussions) provided students with time to reflect on their contributions because students could respond to a question or comment from another student in their own time. One of the interesting and unexpected consequences of this type of communication was that many students commented on the improved academic quality of their own contributions. Students reported feeling the quality of the work they put into the discussion boards was higher than what they would have provided in a face-to-face tutorial. They felt they were more reflective and they felt that this encouraged them to do the reading and engage more with the material in this environment. But students also talked about a lack of spontaneity inherent in discussion boards, which meant there was little incidental
sharing of personal information between students, and that discussions were very often content focused.

The following quotes detail some of the complexities students raised in talking about the use of discussion boards. Some reflected on the strength of this environment over the face-to-face learning environment and suggested this tool encouraged them to participate more than they did on campus. For some students this higher level of participation related to a feeling of anonymity, and for others it was because the environment gave them more time to respond to a discussion. Most students commented on this. It was particularly difficult for one international student from Malaysia. This student spoke to many of the themes raised by other students including the lack of the normal visual cues, the value of having time to reflect on his contributions, the delay in getting other’s responses, the anxiety of the written medium and the quality of his own thoughts and contributions to the discussion:

CS13: well it was very different. It was sort of like you don’t have the same as in a tute because people are not there for you to see and understand what they are saying with their face as well as their words. So it is very different. There is still the interaction between people but because you put it on the bulletin board but often you have to wait for a number of days for people to respond and so that is very different to class. Actually it was good for my girlfriend because she was able to take her time with the written work and this was good. I think she felt she understood it more and was under less pressure.

Interviewer: was that the same for you

CS13: yes it was, although my English is pretty good, I still like to have the time to go through things and make sure they are right because unlike a chat room the bulletin board stays there and people will continue to read it over time I think.

Interviewer: Do you think this affected the quality of what you wrote?

CS13: umm yes I think so. In some ways I think I tried harder to be more accurate with what I said in the discussion board, and I had a lot more time to think about what I was putting in the discussion board so maybe that was even better than when I go to a tutorial. I am not quiet in tutorials, not like my
girlfriend but I think I do spend more time thinking about what I say and sometimes the discussion moves on and I am still thinking about what I was going to say.

Other students were simply delighted to participate more. One student who had made a number of references previously about the anonymity of the online environment was asked about her use of the discussion boards in comparison to her participation in a face-to-face learning environment. She responded:

CS5: From past experiences I just know that I just don’t talk when I’m in a group of people that I don’t know. In my [online] tutorial I’m in there you know disagreeing with the tutor and talking to everyone. I would never do that when I’m face to face. I would be just nodding going yep, no, you’re right. So [in the online class] I have an opinion ... I think ... and I guess it’s that faceless person. And I enjoyed it, I felt there was more interaction back and forth as well.

For others, the discussion board represented a frustrating environment where the time lag between making a contribution and receiving a response led one student to suggest discussion boards were more like opinion forums. The following responses are typical of the frustrations discussed by several students.

CS5: Umm Doug [tutor] would email us saying I posted something up on the discussion board. And because I’m at work and I’ve got internet access at work I go on my lunch hour so I have more access I guess than students might have who just check it at night or might go to one of the computers at uni. So I was able to go and do that fairly regularly. That probably wasn’t a great success.

Interviewer: Yeah why was that?

CS5: Because you would go, like Doug might post something on the Monday I might go on the Tuesday next person might not go on until the Friday and the next person might not go on until ... who knows. It wasn’t as interactive and there wasn’t any coming back and saying okay great you’ve made that point what do you think about this now?

Interviewer: There wasn’t the immediate feedback or a feedback process.
CS5:  It was just scribe and send and that was it.

CS6: Because there is no delay in the, I guess the response, the reaction time you tend to get more reaction whereas in the discussion board I guess it can tend to be a tendency for it to be a forum for peoples opinion and not necessarily feedback on those opinions. If you don’t like someone’s opinion it’s very easy just to go to the next part of the online tutorial and ignore it. Whereas in the chat room or in a tutorial you’re more likely to respond back.

Given this diversity of experiences it was obvious that a text-only learning environment had implications for students’ participation.

The implications of the written medium on students' participation.

This idea that the text basis of their communications directly affected how students engaged, was very present in their reflections about their online experiences and was the most notable distinction between their experiences of using discussion board tools verses chat room tools. All students commented on how important the written medium was and all reported a level of performance anxiety related to adding their own written contributions. Most made remarks like this:

CS2: yeah well your words are written there, everyone focusing on that, where as in a discussion things you say can come and go more quickly, I think maybe it is a speed thing, and it is also when something is written it is visual, in front of you, unmm its almost as though ... it was like a pressure that what you had to say had to be almost profound sometimes, absolutely unmm 100 % correct and you had to have ...it wasn’t just the casual relaxed discussion.

This was more of an issue with discussion boards because they are permanent for the life of the course (because early discussions are always accessible and visible in later weeks) and students often commented on the anxiety they felt about posting their work to the discussion board medium. The following response is typical of this and eloquently details the sense of exposure experienced by this student about their written work. This sense of prolonged exposure is rarely experienced in the same way
in the face-to-face learning environment because most written communication is between the student and their teacher, not student to class. This student is referring to an exercise that explored Wittgenstein’s idea that the language we attach to an object, gives the object both its meaning and function within the rules of the language game we live in. The entire class was sent the same photo of a scribe’s inking block circa 500BC and told ‘Your life (as in your paid work) depends on this item. Describe what it is, what your job is and what you use it for?’ Students were told there was no correct answer to this question, but rather they had to create the meaning they would associate with this object.

Interviewer: what was the best part of it

CS10: umm I think the discussion board, like it gave you a chance to have a bit of a think about it and then put something up there. I sort of liked that, how everybody’s ideas sort of progressed as the discussion went along. I liked one of the exercises where we had to, you know we got sent a photo on the email and we had to say what the thing was and what it was used for, like it was our work tool or whatever.

Interviewer: yeah I remember that

CS10: Like that was really great cause you would look at it and think yeah okay I have an idea then. And from then on that was what it was in your mind sort of. I was the first one to post my ideas up about the object and then I just waited to see what everyone else had to say it was funny

Interviewer: how did you feel when you went in to post yours up and no one else’s was in there

CS10: yeah well that was really funny because I reckon everyone was hanging back that week because in the other weeks people sort of responded early in the week but that one everybody hung back I reckon

Interviewer: because it was asking them to interpret what it was rather that just report on a reading or whatever

CS10: yeah it was like you were putting a bit of yourself up there or something, anyway I thought stuff it I am just going to do it. So I put my ideas up, anyway they sort of flowed from there and everybody else put their stuff up. It was really interesting to see.
Another student commented on this but also talked about the value and flexibility of being able to review material in a way that is not possible in the face-to-face environment.

Interviewer: yes I understand so the fact that it was written did that alter anything or make it different

CS15: oh yes I think so because it stayed there and you could read over and over again so I think I wanted to get it right but not sound too over the top

Interviewer: so did you often re-read discussions

CS15: yes if someone added something new and when it came to doing the assignments I went back over things that were relevant to the essay topics I had picked and sort of re-read things to make sure I got the right gist of things

As discussed, the asynchronous nature of discussion boards as a written medium has both positive and negative features for students. Their capacity to thoughtfully contribute to a discussion was equally important as the anxiety they felt at putting their written contributions permanently on display in the course. The flexibility offered by the non-time dependant medium was as important as the lack of a timely response experienced by some students. However, in discussing the differences between the online medium and their on-campus experiences, the capacity to incidentally share personal information was evidently an important factor.

For most students this incidental sharing of personal information occurred in the course of informal meetings or spontaneous discussions within class, often described as information shared by-the-way. The following excerpt details one student’s reflection on the reduced opportunity for spontaneous discussions to develop within the discussion boards.

Interviewer: so did you think what you wrote was better that what you would have said in class

Chapter 3 The First Case – RMIT Social Science
CS15: well I think they are really different because in the online stuff you posed the questions for us, see then I would go and do the reading with the question in mind like and then do the post. In a tutorial or even a workshop that is really different because you sort of do it more off the top of your head. Like you have done the reading but sometimes it is a bit unfocused or whatever and you sort of make it through on a wing and a prayer

Interviewer: so in the online class you had to think about it more

CS15: yeah but then I guess there is also less chance of you just spontaneously heading off on some really interesting track or getting into some weird conversation about what you did last weekend. So there is good and bad in it.

The tools available in online learning environments that provide for this type of spontaneous, real-time interaction this student is alluding to, are loosely known as chat environments.

The chat environment.

There are a number of synchronous, real-time discussion tools available in most commercially produced online learning environments or Course Management Systems (CMS). These real-time discussion tools or environments go under various names including ‘lecture hall’, ‘virtual classroom’ or ‘chat room’, etc. The term environment is often used when discussing chat tools because CMS developers have now started to create multiple tools within the one chat environment. Each of these environments often has a variety of interfaces and tools, such as white boards and slide shows, but all have one common element in the form of a live dialogue box. This live dialogue box displays user’s comments sequentially as they contribute them. Earlier comments scroll off the top of the screen as new comments are added at the bottom. Many earlier versions of these tools did not create any permanent log of the conversations that occurred in these environments and as such, they didn’t present the same permanence issues raised by discussion boards. Some of the students
interviewed for this project completed a version of the Contemporary Social Theory course that included the use of a chat environment, and they commented on the effectiveness of this environment in facilitating a greater sense of connection with each other.

Interestingly, some students also had quite mixed reactions to this environment. Some loved the ‘live’ and spontaneous nature of it, while others felt the quality of their contributions suffered. Significantly for the development of social learning support networks, students often commented that while in chat environments they felt they got to know the other students better because it was spontaneous and people often included personal aspects of their lives.

These first two excerpts are two students’ reflections on discussion boards. Interestingly, both students draw on their experiences of chat environments to provide a sense of contrast. They convey the chat environment as engendering a different sort of feeling. It is obviously friendlier in some ways and there is a sense of the conversation flowing more freely:

*Interviewer: did you get to know people*

*CS9: sort of but not like you do in a chat session or whatever, but then again you don’t really know them either I guess but it is just that in live chat you get to talk about silly things, not really school related and inevitably you talk about yourself and things about your life, then I think you get to know people.*

*~:~*

*CS7: I probably couldn’t get enough of who they were from what they wrote because it was written so academically. Because people were trying to you know say what they really wanted to say without getting blown apart sort of thing. Maybe if there was more live chat rooms then I might have got a better sense of who they were.*
For some, the real-time nature of the chat environment and the ephemeral nature of the conversations that occurred within this context, reduced the level of anxiety felt about communicating solely through a text-based environment.

CS12: yeah that is it, like it is happening now and not you don’t have to sit around and wait for replies to happen and that ... so you can just say things and not have to worry so much about getting it right because the tute just keeps going. Where as with the discussion board it is like you walk up on stage, go to the microphone and say your bit and worse than that it stays there all semester

The only international student in this case was by far the most computer literate and experienced Internet user interviewed. The version of the course he completed did not contain a chat room. However, he had significant experience in other online environments and commented on the capacity of the chat environment to foster a sense of connection with people.

Interviewer: so did you get a feeling of connecting with people in the online tutorial

CS13: no not like I have in chat rooms

Interviewer: so do you access other chat environments

CS13: yes I love IRC and I spend a lot of time chatting to people there

Interviewer: so you have felt a sense of connection or community in that environment

CS13: Oh yes you get to know people and you joke about things and it is live so people are there, right there at that time. It is like talking to someone and if you talk to someone long enough you start to get to know them or at least to feel comfortable with them to share bits of yourself.

Chat environments are typically fairly fast forms of online communication because there are often ten or twelve people contributing to a discussion, with each person responding or posing questions in the same space. As such, the dialogue box that displays people’s contributions tends to scroll through fairly fast if the chat facility
has a number of experienced users logged on. In non-learning online chat environments; users have developed a vast array of acronyms to convey regularly used segments of conversations or typical responses that might occur in a face-to-face environment. For example, *lol* is *laugh out loud* and is usually used as a response to a joke or some other funny event. For some novice users (most of those enrolled in these online courses) both the speed of the environment and the use of these acronyms became a point of contention, and for this student it represented a barrier to her engagement with other students. One of the students she is talking about was actively engaged in the chat environment but was not interviewed for this project.

> CS2: There was quite a few and I think there was quite a few that actually didn't participate in the tutes, but I think there was at least two that I didn't know anything about. Umm a few that, I think they were Asian or from Hong Kong, who had a really good grip on the sort of lingo you use in a chat room. I'd never used the language and so there was this person I didn't know, I guess that is the competitive thing coming out in me, with a grip on this language... so it was like they had an edge an advantage.

For others, the real-time nature of chat environments became a barrier because it required them to be logged on at a certain time. Typically, chat environments within course management systems are intended to replicate a designed learning event a student might encounter on-campus. Most often these tools or spaces are named accordingly (e.g. seminar or tutorial) and this metaphor creates a connection to a student’s on-campus learning experience. Students are usually advised at the beginning of a course that they will be required to login to the environment on a certain number of dates, at a certain time. When a chat facility was integrated into the Contemporary Social Theory, course students were required to attend one of two live (real-time) tutorials a week in the online environment. This student sums up some of the difficulties in creating time dependant learning events for people who have often
chosen to study online courses as a way of balancing their work, life and study commitments.

*Interviewer:* So how did you experience those two mediums different in a way?

CS8: The discussion bulletin was good because you didn’t have to, you could do it whenever you wanted to. Like you could log in and read it at midnight if you wanted to. But the tutes are hard because they were at an assigned time. And which for me was awkward because I think it was a 6 o’clock on a Wednesday and Friday and I usually don’t get back from work till late so it was like rush, rush, rush to get home to get on line so you could participate. So yeah the discussion you could do whenever you wanted to logistically the tutes are a little bit different because you had to be there. But it was good that you could come and log on mid way through and just catch up. And it was good that all of the dialogue was left there so you could go back and pick up bits and pieces.

In analysing the data from this case, and exploring students’ experiences of translating their communication dialogue with each other into a written medium, a common element emerged that was present in all the discussions about their level of engagement with each other – anonymity.

**Issues of anonymity and identity inherent in the design of these courses.**

Most students attributed the lack of familiarity with each other to the anonymous nature of the online medium being based on the lack of physical co-presence to each other. Even though all the students’ names appeared in the online environment most still commented that some how it felt ‘anonymous’. Clearly this had some relationship to their inability to put a face to the names of their fellow students. One student recounted a chance meeting with another student who she knew to be studying in her program. During their conversation they discussed the semester of study they had just completed and realised that they had both completed the Contemporary Social Theory
course online that semester but didn’t realise who the other person was until that point, because they had not recognised each other in the online environment. On campus these two students had the sort of acquaintanceship that would have allowed them to call on each other for support. However, not only did the online environment not support the development of these sorts of support relationships, it also did not facilitate the continuation of existing connections between people.

Another student recounted how she had realised that one of the other students in her course also worked in the same government department when she saw her name on a staff seminar. Unfortunately she arrived late to the seminar and missed the introductions. She talked of the frustration of sitting through the seminar and not knowing which of the three women on the panel was her classmate. After the seminar she felt too embarrassed to approach the women to clarify their identity and seemed a little saddened that to this day, she still doesn’t actually know her other co-worker by sight. When we talked about her experiences further, this student revealed some of the complex issues involved in understanding how these students participated in the online environment and the subtle interplay between the desire to know who you are studying with and the anxiety created by the written medium.

CS3: so I still haven't met her but she was there and like I do the web site for our work, and she's in corporate communications, but I still don't know who she is

Interviewer: so how does that all sort of feel or you know

CS3: well it makes me feel maybe we should have a photo

Interviewer: oh yeah

CS3: and then it makes me think, you know I know people like being anonymous cause they just say whatever they want. And they don't care how stupid or how smart or whatever they look. Like people were saying ...saying stuff...
**Interviewer:** like what sort of stuff

CS3: oh I mean some people were really sort of, I don't know, we all ... I suppose if you are in a tute you probably wouldn't make such, and it is only me saying it is naïve, they mightn't think it was naïve, but you know you wouldn't make certain comments because you might think... but whereas you are anonymous and you can sort of say whatever you want.

**Interviewer:** so was that anonymous stuff is quite significant in a way

CS3: yeah I think so, it was for me because I had difficulty with the material, so it wasn't so bad if I stuffed up .. and I was making typos all the time. (laugh) it was so embarrassing and not like spelling mistakes actual typos. I was like exhausted by the end and it was like, woops sorry

When the possibility of providing some sort of student profile page (with a photo) was discussed, most of the students had similar mixed reactions. It became clear that, just as the issues raised by the different synchronous and asynchronous tools had both positive and negative aspects, the perceived anonymity of the online environment also encouraged some students to participate more.

CS5: But the anonymity I can just sit there and go blah blah and say something totally stupid and they’re not going to know they’re not going to see me on campus and go wow. So I just feel more comfortable I’m more comfortable then just sitting there going but I think this and you’re, not that you’re wrong, but I disagree and what about that. And even asking questions about the assignment that would probably be silly I will either email or say online and Doug as a tutor is pretty good. Silly questions always sound that... or don’t quite understand that. Or not silly questions but questions ... like in class I probably wouldn’t, I would wait till the end of the class. I go up and tap them on the shoulder and say 'I'm a bit confused’ but there I could ask it and I found one question that I asked her which I thought was a pretty dumb question the other person that was on line at the time said yeah we agreed with what I was asking, see I wouldn’t have asked that question in a normal tutorial.

For others it was clear that they felt having a face to put beside a name would have helped them know their fellow students and engage with them differently.
CS2: One of the things that I was disappointed in was that the personal profiling didn’t work in the online system. Because I thought well that will help with people I don't know because if I can see their face, read their blub, that will bring that person to life for me when they are talking in the chat room. For some reason I need that, it is a bit like umm. Some people can do things without really understanding it, I need to really understand things to do them or have a perception of the people you are interacting with.

Two students commented that this combination of anonymity and the lack of physical presence resulted in some students getting into arguments or responding to other students in a different way than they would if they had been in the same physical room. As one student remarked ‘they would never say that sort of thing if they were in your face’ (CS3). Interestingly, when asked if they felt this was detrimental to the learning process, both commented that it was not, that it tended to spur on greater debate in the forum.

While most students commented on the lack of physical presence in the online learning environment, two commented that they believed they participated far more in this environment than in the on-campus learning environment. All believed that the lack of the usual non-verbal cues associated with face-to-face environments, restricted their capacity to engage with each other or to ‘really’ get to know each other in the online environment. CS7 in the following excerpt explores what it might mean for him to engage in discussions with people that he actually knows.

Interviewer: So some students have talked about, and you’ve touched on it a little, about something to do with the anonymity in the online environment means that sometimes you can say more stuff than maybe what you would in a face-to-face tute. Some students have talked about how it might be good to have sort of student profiles within there and that they felt that it would mean that they would know the person that they were talking to more. What do you think of that do you think that’s important or not or...

CS7: It would have benefits yeah easily. Personally I would feel right easily. Like it’s good being anonymous because you get more exciting discussions but
when you know someone you might write more meaningfully or I don’t know ... but it could be really good.

Interviewer: So any draw backs of actually having profiles on there do you think?

CS7: For me it wouldn't be so bad you know I mean yeah no I think it would be all right yeah.

It is clear that there are a number of complex factors at work in trying to understand how this online learning environment, as a medium, affected how this group of students participated. These factors included the tools that were used in the constructed online learning environment, the translation of students’ normal communications processes out of a verbal culture into a text-based one, and the capacity of the online medium to actually provide students with an environment where they could know each other versus maintaining their anonymity. In understanding that the medium of the online learning environment shaped students engagement and participation with each other, it is then possible to explore how their participation affected the development of support networks with each other. Remembering that all these students had talked about the importance of developing some connection with another student and that this usually occurred via knowing someone else (either as a friend or as an acquaintance), it was interesting to ask them why they felt they had not developed these sorts of connections in the online environment and to understand if the shaping of their participation by the medium had, in turn, shaped their connections with other students.
How did the students’ participation relate to the development of Social Learning Support Networks?

Three key themes emerged in understanding how students’ participation in the online learning environment related to the development of social learning support networks. Firstly, the constructed online learning environment in which these students completed their course provided them with little opportunity to develop these sorts of social learning support networks. Secondly, most felt their life as an online student was focused around the course content and their engagement with it, as opposed to their engagement with each other. And thirdly, students raised a broad set of issues that could be categorised as the problems involved in balancing their work, private life and study.

In effect, the constructed online learning environment in which these students studied was focused on content and did not easily support the sort of incidental sharing of personal information or the elements involved in getting to know each other that would facilitate a greater sense of connection between students. As such, they responded accordingly. My use of the term constructed when discussing this online learning environment is to highlight that the online learning environment is constructed, just as a face-to-face learning environment is constructed. For example, the seating arrangements within a classroom can affect how students engage with each other. If they are seated in rows students will generally only be able to converse with their immediate neighbours. If you have students seated around tables in groups of five or six, they will have a greater opportunity to share information with the group.
Similarly, if students are asked to engage in collaborative learning activities, this learning environment design provides a greater opportunity for students to share information with each other and to develop a sense of connection with each other (Tinto 1994). The design of the constructed online learning environment in which these students were engaged, directly affected their development of social learning support networks because it didn’t facilitate their engagement with each other. Using the face-to-face analogy, the design of this online learning environment effectively sat these students in rows, and the activities they had to complete did not require them to engage with each other.

The principles outlined above regarding the construction of learning environments are particularly relevant for these students because they had all chosen to study online due to time related pressures of trying to balance their work, private lives and study. As such, for these students, generating contact with each other outside the constructed online environment (either on campus or via email, SMS or telephone), or spending time working on developing these networks was not going to happen unless they felt supported in doing so and, importantly, that they were reasonably certain that their efforts would bear fruit. Even though a few of them had attempted to develop connections with other students by organising to meet up on campus, none reported really achieving this. When one examines the students’ reflections about making social connections on campus, it is clear that the physical campus environment played a central role in providing opportunities for students to engage with each other. It is reasonable to argue that because nothing in the constructed online environment supported students in their attempts to engage, their desire to create support networks fell by the wayside under pressures from work and their private lives.
The idea that the online learning environment should support the development of social learning support networks was significant. Even given their time pressures, most students clearly desired this sort of connection and many made suggestions about the types of tools or strategies they thought would be useful. For the most part, students talked about the need for integrated environments where the social interaction would happen as part of their study. The following excerpts really encapsulate all three of the key themes identified about how student participation affected the development of social learning support networks:

CS12: well I guess there is just no space for that stuff, you know you have a purpose to go there, you know contribute to the discussion board or whatever and you just do it so there isn’t any space for that sort of stuff

Interviewer: when you say there isn’t any space for that sort of stuff do you mean like space in that there isn’t a social space or do you mean there isn’t, as an online student you don’t have time for that stuff

CS12: well both I guess. Like there was nothing in our course for that - everything was about what we were studying. And I am not saying there wouldn’t be time for that online if it was part of what we were doing because it is important, it is just I don’t have a lot of spare time so I wouldn’t want to have to come into town to sit around and meet people like.

The idea that, a social space as a part of the course, needed to be developed within the online learning environment, was present in many of the students’ comments. CS6 talks about this and also clearly suggests the need for an integrated approach:

CS6: I think it [social interaction] needs to be somehow tied to the, sort of tied to the task that people have to do. And what I mean by that is that I don’t think it should be completely separate in a technical sense a completely separate space because I’d think you’ll find a lot of people that have done online subjects, the impression I get is that they go and do what they have to do, and if there are these optional areas that they can visit they don’t tend to visit them. They only go in and do what they have to do. So if it’s made somehow part of that for instance I’ll tell you an idea if one of the weeks was some sort of social interaction completely unrelated to what the course was about, like not a normal question about this weeks topic sort of thing and people may be
more likely to do it. If it fits into their routine I think they will do it, if it’s an add-on I don’t think people do the add-ons they do the incorporated stuff.

An alternative idea, designed to foster a sense of connection between students, was put forward by a couple of students. This involved having a mid-semester activity that required students to get together either on-campus or as part of an excursion. Incorporating this type of learning activity into a course effectively changes the course from a completely online course to a mixed mode delivery course because of the requirement for students to attend on-campus.

Interestingly, this suggestion of creating some type of mid-semester activity came about when the students were questioned about an initial on-campus meeting held for their course before the start of the semester. Although the Contemporary Social Theory course could be completed totally online, there was an optional initial meeting on-campus designed to get students over the technical hurdles of having a login and password, and to ensure they could get around in the RMIT Online system. These meetings also provided an opportunity for students to meet the teacher and introduce themselves to each other. Interestingly, none of the students interviewed mentioned this initial meeting of their own volition. However, when they were asked if this meeting had helped them to create a connection with each other, most replied that it had helped them know the teacher and this was good, but that they didn’t remember any of the other students because they met each other en masse and subsequently couldn’t put faces to names.

Conversely, when this idea of creating a mid-semester group activity on-campus was put to the last few students interviewed, all disagreed with the idea. These last four
students were very clear on their reasoning for rejecting this idea, suggesting that they’d chosen to do an online version of the course to help balance out their work, life and study pressures, and that to create an expectation they attend campus during the semester would distort that balance for them.

The issue of balancing work, private life and study is significant because this group of students all cited time pressures as one of the reasons they had chosen to study online. If this was the case for most students studying online, then there was clearly a need to balance up the benefits of working at developing community for students, versus not increasing the time required of them in their study. Many of the students interviewed in this case talked of difficult private and work related time pressures that clearly would prevent them from allocating significantly more time to their studies for no clear benefit. For others, the availability of online courses represented their only possibility of completing their degree.

CS5: Basically I work full time 40 hours. So anytime spent at uni. I need to make up and that, just assuming that my manager is flexible enough to allow me to attend University. So for example this job that I applied for today, if I got that, I may have to defer because just fitting it in. Unless it is online umm it just may not be possible and the new manager may not allow it. So I’m lucky at the moment because my manager is flexible but at the same time if I can do it from home at my own PC or at work in my lunch hour from my PC it just makes it so much more easier.

However, for some students it was clear that if they had to continue to rely on the online medium to complete their studies, due to their isolation and lack of support, many would struggle to complete their programs. In effect these latter students were confirming concerns voiced in the literature about the significant levels of attrition suffered in many online courses (Palloff and Pratt 2001). The Contemporary Social Theory course was offered three times during the data collection phase of this
research and had an attrition rate of between 25% and 40% over the three iterations of the course. While these rates of attrition are not approaching the 50% attrition rates discussed by Carr (2000), they are high enough to warrant concern.

**Implications of this case: the questions answered and the new questions it raised.**

While this case study answered many of my initial questions about the significance of community for tertiary students both online and on-campus, it also raised further questions about the role of the constructed online learning environment in supporting or facilitating the development of social learning support networks. Students in this case study clearly believed that the development of Social Learning Support Networks were important in an undergraduate student’s life. They confirmed that active, constructivist learning environments supported the development of connections between them, but they also provided an insight into the role the physical campus played in providing opportunities for them to engage with each other. Importantly, this group of students provided a new way of understanding how these social networks might develop outside the classroom. The case illustrated how the development of these social networks often relied on the incidental, often informal connections students made on campus. It demonstrated, in effect, how these incidental, informal social interactions can sow the seeds of a learning community that can support students in their learning.

There is obvious value in understanding what role the physical space of a campus plays in the facilitation and development of learning communities or what I have termed *social learning support networks*. While this case doesn’t directly indicate the
way to move forward with the development of this concept in the online learning environment, it would seem that understanding how the students in this research came to be *where they were on campus* and *why they had gone there* gives an indication of the type of space that may be required. These spaces included local cafes, the library, corridors before class, or just walking around, and entering or exiting the campus grounds. The reasons why students found themselves in these various spaces was generally of a utilitarian nature including, getting something to eat, following up something in the library, waiting for class to start and attending the university campus to attend classes. It is important to note that students were not attending a space designated as ‘social’ such as common rooms or student activities centres, rather, these students where doing student business, being students, bumping into one another in a physical environment that was common to them because they were students of the university.

The implications of this for the online learning environment are significant. Clearly, the constructed online environment these students engaged in did not support the development of social learning support networks. While all the students interviewed for this first case believed the development of social networks were important, it was clear that the environment, and the tools within it, did not provide students with the space to casually engage with each other while they completed their course. Could this space exist? Could it be created? Clearly these were questions still to be explored.

This group of students were also all undergraduates. Even though all of them believed the development of social learning support networks were important – was this
possibly something that was particularly relevant to undergraduate students or did it also have resonance for postgraduate students?

The final question this case raised was the issue of balancing work, private life and study pressures with the benefits of developing social learning support networks. The students in this case had all cited time pressures as a factor in deciding to do the course online. This is clearly consistent with findings from other parts of the literature and is generally accepted as a precipitating factor for most students in deciding to do a course online, whether they are undergraduate or postgraduate students.

Could I find a constructed online learning environment to explore, which clearly contained evidence of both students’ social engagement with each other, and evidence for the claim that these social connections actually supported their learning?
My initial interest in researching the experience of students at Sheffield as a case study developed in Greece in 2001, while I was at a conference. I was sitting in the sun-drenched courtyard of a small country school, on the island of Spetses, watching the conference attendees mingle and chat to each other. The night before, I had been re-reading some of the interviews from the first case study and I was thinking about the students’ comments on the importance of the physical environment on people’s engagement with each other. It seemed that before me, in the courtyard of this small country school, I was witnessing an interesting example of what the students from the first case study had identified. This old school was built around a courtyard, the classrooms emptied into hallways and these hallways emptied into the courtyard. The toilets were at one end of the courtyard and the conference organisers had used one of the covered areas at the other end to provide morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea. The courtyard itself was filled with chairs and the odd umbrella to help provide some shade. The conference participants naturally moved into this space after a session, mingled with each other and struck up conversations. The previous day, I had overheard two women talking who had just met each other in a presentation. They walked into the courtyard chatting and, while sharing a cup of tea, decided to stay in the courtyard and skip the next session so they could keep talking about their common academic interests. Clearly, the physical space of the courtyard and its location in relation to the classrooms, facilitated people’s ongoing engagement with each other.
While thinking through what I was observing (and managing to balance a cup of tea and lunch on my knee), I struck up a conversation with Dr Miguel Nunes and Ms Maggie McPherson who just happened to be sitting under the same umbrella. I was fascinated to hear about their virtual social space project. After some lively discussion, the three of us sat in the sun and envisioned a lively, engaged, and lived-in online social environment that would support their students in making and maintaining connections with each other. Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson suggested their Virtual Social Space might be an excellent case study for my Ph.D. My initial exuberance crumbled when I contacted Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson several months later to enquire how the online social space was going. To their surprise (and mine) they reported, after some initial use, that the space had failed to sustain any real contact between students.

The failure of the site to sustain any ongoing student-to-student interaction created some doubt in my mind about using it as part of this study. However, in discussions with my supervisor, I decided that rather than exclude it from the study because it had failed, the MA in Information Technology Management program and its accompanying online social space, might provide insights not present in the current literature specifically because students didn’t use it. In subsequent discussions with Dr Nunes and Ms McPherson it was agreed that I would investigate the students use of the VSS both as an evaluation for the MA ITM program team, and to gather data relevant for this study. The data used for the evaluation of the VSS was a subset of the overall data gathered for this project.
The MA in IT Management program at the University of Sheffield, England, provided me with an excellent opportunity to explore the students’ experiences of a constructed virtual social space that was developed to support postgraduate students because it provided two points of contrast with the first case. Firstly, this was a postgraduate level program and, as such, provided the opportunity to compare undergraduate students’ understanding of the significance of community in the first case study with those of a postgraduate student cohort. Secondly, the Virtual Social Space (VSS) had been designed to address problems identified in the literature. The VSS was designed to overcome the lack of socialisation and isolation experienced by many online and distance students. What was of particular interest was that even though the VSS was developed in consultation with the students from this program, the site still failed to be used in any sustained way after its implementation. Clearly, this group of postgraduate students could add to this project’s emerging understanding of the significance of community for tertiary students while also provide further clarification on how social connections might form between students. These students could also provide valuable insights into the role and design of the constructed online learning environment students typically encounter when they choose to study online.

When the MA in ITM program team decided to develop the VSS, they were already engaged in an ongoing, continuous improvement process that was being continually researched and evaluated. (See McPherson’s personal web site for a complete list of publications relating to the various improvements for this program at http://dagda.shef.ac.uk/mcpherso/MMPublications.htm). The design and development of the VSS was the result of one of these continuous improvement cycles and is also well documented by the team (Nunes et al 2002). However, to provide a context for
the reader, it is useful to briefly outline some of the key elements and design principles found in the VSS.

**Why the need for a Virtual Social Space in the MA ITM Program?**

Most university programs are arranged around a number of courses or modules which, when completed, equal the number of credit points required for the awarding of a particular qualification. The MA in ITM was no exception. When this typical on-campus program design is translated into the online learning environment, programs often end up with a modular type of course architecture. Typically, each course has its own online learning space set up and run by the course coordinator or lecturer. In course management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard, individual courses get their own online course site that may include a variety of communication tools (usually discussion boards, chat environments and email). This modular approach supports the specific course learning objectives, activities and tasks. Online courses may also encourage various levels of social or non-content driven communication amongst participants. Typically this occurs via a discussion board that sits outside of the various course content related discussion activities and is defined as a social space (often called “a café” or “Pub” for example, to denote the space as different from the other discussion spaces created within the site). While providing a space for students to engage, these little ‘bolted-on cafes’ seem a bit lean compared to the richness of the typical on-campus facilities designed to support students.

On-campus educators and administrators have understood the value of developing a multitude of support systems to assist students in their studies for many years. Most Australian universities now provide a variety of both social and academic support
systems for their on-campus students. While the academic support systems include facilities such as libraries and learning skills units, the social support structures often include pastoral and social care systems such as induction programs, counselling and health care services, student accommodation services, and all manner of clubs and societies. However, most online course development projects (e.g. Luck 2001) have not actively incorporated the development of an online version of the social learning support systems typically offered on-campus. While there have been discussions about the need to create ‘community’ within a course, the focus on course-level design has meant there hasn’t been the same level of discussion about the need to generate program-level community or learning support systems.

However, it is clear that the communication tools currently used at a course level could also be used at a program level to support the development of community. Theorists, such as Lake (1999), suggest that tools such as discussion boards and chat environments may enable the development of empowering modes of communication for students. Certainly most course management systems include tools that enable the following forms of communication to develop:

- *one-way* (tutor → students) communication through course notes and explicit knowledge web pages;
- *two-way discussions* (tutor ↔ student) through tutorial learning activities; and
- *unstructured communication* (tutor ↔ student ↔ student) either in informal asynchronous communication areas (course café) or in private chat rooms.

Lake (1999) suggests creating the opportunities for this form of *unstructured communication* can encourage the development of community amongst students.
While these tools are not being used at a program level, in recent years, many course developers have included a discussion board for this purpose in their online courses. While each of the MA in ITM program’s online course environments contained a social discussion board facility such as a course ‘café’, staff felt something was lost each time students had to change their café for a new course.

This is a consequence of the fact that most university online learning environments are course-based and it is common for students to lose access to a course site once they have completed that course. Each semester, students encounter a new set of online course sites and subsequently they loose socializing conduits and the previous history of conversation threads - as well as useful study mechanisms (e.g. non-module specific topics, well known environments, web links). So, although these course-based social spaces appear adequate to support informal and social communication within a course, the history and human presence encapsulated within the student-to-student interactions recorded within the discussion boards are lost at the end of each course. Furthermore, the Sheffield program team reported that students studying online lacked an overall anchoring space to bind the different courses, cohorts and educators together. There was no place that was the MA in ITM program.

It was this lack of an overall anchoring social space for their program that convinced the Sheffield program team to set about creating a new space that would be available to students for the duration of their program enrolment. They hoped this space would provide a persistent, overarching social and information environment that would facilitate peer-to-peer communication and promote socialising in a familiar setting. Ideally, the space would also provide a level of administrative support and general
program and university information. The early design and structure of the Virtual Social Space (VSS) resulted from a Masters research project undertaken by Gilchrist (2000) and included five elements. These were: a Personal Portraits Gallery, a Chat Room, a Social Calendar, a Course News section, a Useful Contacts section and, an Alumni section. These elements were then grouped into three major VSS areas: Work related area, Play area and a Retrospective area (later renamed The History Channel) that provided alumni information and program advice.

![Diagram of VSS prototype architecture](image)

**Figure 4 - VSS prototype architecture. (Nunes et al 2002)**

The initial VSS prototype was a working model using a WebCT site. Staff received student feedback on the prototype and, with some minor amendments, the site went live in late 2001. The final architecture of the site is described in depth in Nunes et al 2002. Staff incorporated the idea that the space be *owned* by students into the design
principles of the VSS. To achieve this, the MA in ITM program team decided to make the space largely student managed. This meant, in real terms, that students were responsible for updating the space and that generally the staff would not be present in the day-to-day operation of the site.

Following the initial launch of the site, the Sheffield team reported that the level of student activity was quite high. However, over the next three months the student activity levels and their input into the site gradually dropped away, and it became clear that the site was no longer sustaining any real student-to-student communication.

As I have said, I wanted answers to five broad questions all designed to explore the significance of community for students studying online. These included:

1. Did students think community was important to them?
2. Had they experienced this sense of community in either the face-to-face environment or in an online learning environment?
3. How did they believe community developed in the learning environment?
4. Did students believe these social networks supported their learning processes and if so, how?
5. What role did the constructed online environment play in facilitating the development of these social networks?

This case study allowed me to further explore these questions and develop an understanding of why this particular online environment, seemingly complete with all components required to promote the development of online learning community, failed to provide the sort of environment which might foster a sense of connection between students. In discussion with the Sheffield team and the students enrolled in
the program, it was decided that an email-based questionnaire would be used to gather data on the students’ experiences.

The questionnaire design and analysis of the data.

I developed the email-based questionnaire with three distinct sections: Demographic Data, Understanding the Social Networks that Support Learning and The Virtual Social Space Site. The last section was broken into four components: an overall exploration of the students’ use of the VSS, and three separate sections that explored the respondents’ use of the various components of the VSS - The Work Zone, The Social Circle and the History Channel.

In designing the questionnaire, I wanted to ask both qualitative and quantitative questions to establish the volume and nature of student social contacts. The demographic data section contained questions, which not only sought standard information, but also sought information about the students’ use of the Internet. This included exploring the volume of students’ Internet usage for social, work and study related purposes, and asked them why they had chosen to study online. The remaining two sections of the questionnaire contained questions relating to students’ social contact with one another and their use of the VSS.

The questionnaire also specifically explored the students’ non-online social interactions with each other in order to clarify their possible use of alternative or parallel communication systems that possibly existed independently of the VSS. This was used to clarify the importance (or otherwise) of social contact between this group of postgraduate students irrespective of their use of the online environment.
Understanding this group of students’ experiences would clarify whether or not the significance the undergraduates from the first case had placed on the development of social learning support networks was relevant for postgraduate students. If students had no contact with each other, or believed there was no value in having social contact with each other, then obviously attempts at creating an online environment that fostered community would fail.

The quantitative components of the questionnaire were simply tallied and used as part of the analysis of themes, helping me to clarify patterns of Internet use and their relationship to social contact and any subsequent use of the virtual social space. Analysis of this case was also aided by the design of the questionnaire, which took respondents through a series of questions that allowed them to reflect on their experiences and then build on their own responses. As such, the final “Any other comments?” question often yielded a rich, reflective understanding of the student’s own use of the virtual social space, and how this might be relevant to their sense of the significance of their social contact in the learning process. The final questionnaire included fifty-three questions and was emailed to the thirty-four students who had agreed to participate. Sixteen of these students returned the survey and fourteen of these students agreed for me to contact them further via email to clarify any of their answers.

In discussing the results of this case I have used a similar process to the one I used in the first case study. I ask:

1. Did they believe community was important?
2. Was there a sense of community/connection in this program for these students? How was it fostered?

3. Did the students believe community supported their learning?

4. Was the ‘work-life-study balance’ issue also apparent in this case?

5. Why didn't the students use the VSS?

In discussing the findings from the second case, rather than reporting students’ responses in the same level of detail as the first case, I have focused on the information provided by students that either illustrates postgraduate-specific observations about community, or that explicitly relates to the learning environment these students encountered.

**Who responded to the questionnaire?**

The total number of questionnaires returned was sixteen out of thirty-four, representing a surprisingly high return rate, for email-based questionnaires, of 47.06%. Of these sixteen respondents, seven were male and nine were female. They formed a representative sample both in terms of age breakdown and cohort depiction as detailed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Year of Study Distribution</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>- 4</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; year - 3 out of a possible 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>- 4</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; year - 6 out of a possible 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
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<td>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; year - 7 out of a possible 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
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<td>&gt;50</td>
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The students who responded all had permanent residential addresses either in England or Ireland.
Did these students believe community was important?

It was clear that students in the MA in ITM program believed community was important. Twelve of the sixteen students responded that community was significant and provided indications that community, or making connections with other students, both supported and motivated them. The following response was typical and illustrates this mix of ideas:

s8: What importance would you ascribe to the social contacts you have with other students in the programme?

(as8) Support and motivation. Drives you to keep going and also to have a good moan occasionally. Helps to share ideas in particular, but also to meet a new friend and create a good friendship that hopefully will last beyond the course. It may also be useful in terms of career development and support. (07_3)

Unlike students in the first case study, the Sheffield students located their learning experiences and their level of engagement with each other in the context of their careers. Other than commenting on the tensions in trying to fit their study into busy work and personal lives, students also discussed the significance of feeling part of a learning community in the context of their careers and personal life. The following student’s comments directly relates his/her sense of community to the opportunity to not only discuss issues with the course but also to talk about work:

I believe it is very important to keep in contact so that any concerns in relation to the course are shared and most importantly to discuss our respective jobs and social life. (01_1)

Others focused on the value of the emotional support when asked about the importance of the social connections they had made with other students:

Very helpful in providing support & just reminding me that everyone is in the same situation but that it is not impossible (as it sometimes seems). (03_2)

The first number in a respondent’s identifying label is the respondent number and the second number corresponds to their year level. In this case the quote is from the 7th respondent who is in the 3rd year of their program.
Understand that your own problems are not yours alone and others struggle with the level of work involved while working full time. (04_2)

However, unlike the undergraduate students interviewed in the first case study, not all the postgraduate students agreed that community was important to them as a student.

Even though 75% of students (12) had suggested that community was significant, the other four students disagreed. This was in marked contrast to the first case where all of the students interviewed had talked about the significance and value of making connections with other students. Further analysis of the questionnaires from the four students that didn’t believe social connection was significant or who were ambivalent about it, revealed an interesting connection between their reasons for choosing to study online and their view that community was not significant in a learning context. Three of these students had cited the main reason why they had chosen to study online was because they liked to study alone. This is important because it reveals the diversity of postgraduate students’ needs and expectations related to online education. It indicates that, for some students, their expectations of studying online are probably more in line with Richardson’s (2000) traditional paper-based Distance Education (DE) model discussed in chapter 1. In a traditional paper-based DE model, students are expected to be self-directed in their learning and it is technically difficult to create student-to-student contact. It is possible these responses indicated an expectation by these students that the MA in ITM program would be more like a traditional paper-based DE program, and therefore not require them to engage with each other.

The fourth student’s questionnaire was interesting because of the contradictions in his responses. While he had suggested that social connection between students was not
that significant, he had gone to the trouble of emailing and telephoning other students in order to meet up for dinner on the program workshop days held each semester. Clearly he, like other students, had valued the social connections he had with other students on these days because he had chosen to continue to connect up with other students on most of these program workshop days.

**Was there a sense of community or connection for students in this course? How was it fostered?**

It is certain that students studying in the Sheffield program did not feel that they were part of a community via their connection to the physical campus in the same way that the students in the first case had described. Only four out of the sixteen respondents reported visiting the campus outside of the program workshop days. However, there was strong evidence of significant social connection between these students that meant that many of them identified as being part of the MA in ITM program community. Interestingly, these students made significantly more effort to physically connect up with each other than the undergraduate students in the first case study, and many maintained strong email and telephone-based connections with each other.

Like the students from the first case, this group of students identified that the opportunity to physically meet up, share incidental personal information and get to know each other, was extremely important in the development of connections with each other. The most common form of physical (versus electronic) social connection these students had with each other was structured around the program workshop days. Students commented on these program workshop days time and time again when discussing the connections they had made with each other. In a sense, these workshop
days each semester, became an anchoring point around which students developed their connections with each other. As well as the opportunities provided during the workshop morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea breaks, fourteen of the sixteen respondents organized to meet up with other students for dinner and/or drinks, either on the night before, or on the evening of, most program workshop days. The significance of these on-campus workshops for the development of social connections between students led one respondent to comment:

*It probably is important to remember that the day schools are the most valuable elements of social contact. I have seen my fellow students more times in the last three years than some members of our family. This may be all that is needed to maintain our “student culture”. (06_3)*

For some, these workshop-related social engagements led them to develop connections with other students that went on to become friendships that have lasted beyond the program. For others, the discovery that another student also lived close by was enough for them to pursue a connection with the student in their hometown. The nature of these social connections varied between literally just having a catch-up drink the night before a workshop, to the development of enduring friendships. The connections these students made with each other didn’t just revolve around the program content or assessment. Ten out of the sixteen students who responded to the questionnaire reported that they maintained regular contact with another student on matters unrelated to the courses they were studying.

This group of students also reported a heavy reliance on electronic communication to maintain a connection once they had established contact with another student. Thirteen out of the sixteen students regularly used email or the telephone to contact one another. This was not surprising when the students’ patterns of personal and
professional Internet usage were examined. Fifteen of the sixteen respondents used email to maintain social contact with friends and relatives and, on average, this group of students sent thirteen emails a week they defined as social. Obviously, this familiarity with the email medium explains their overwhelming preference for email as the main communication medium within this community, and may also provide some explanation as to why this group of students didn’t engage with the VSS as a way of connecting up with each other.

Some of the later year students also commented, with some regret, that they wished they had put more effort into making connections with other students earlier in their program. For some, it appeared that once the initial first or second semester had passed, it was difficult to create that connection with other students. For many, it seemed the early directions provided by the program team were significant. A couple of students from the same program year commented on how they had been consistently discouraged from contacting teaching staff about ‘trivial matters’ in the first semester of first year, and that they believed this set up an ‘individual’ culture within the program. Interestingly, this strategy was probably designed to foster greater student-to-student interaction by trying to encourage students to contact each other and rely on their fellow year students for support and information. However, for these two students at least, it became an isolating factor because in the absence of any modelled engagement they were uncertain who to turn to. Clearly for these students in their first year of postgraduate studies, they were uncertain about how they should engage with either each other or the program staff team. Interestingly, this idea of modelling communication behaviour is important in any new online space created. Many writers strongly support this idea (Salmon 2001). Teaching staff should model
the desired communication behaviour and style for students by their own formal and informal interactions in an online environment.

**Did the students believe community supported their learning?**

Like the undergraduate students in the first case study, the Sheffield students clearly believed that community supported their learning, and they worked hard to develop social learning support networks. They provided numerous examples of how their connections with each other provided both practical and emotional support that assisted them in their studies. The practical support ranged from helping one another with referencing, to getting assistance with finding materials for assignments and clarifying assignment details, to discussions on course content. Understandably, many observed that their contact with other students increased around assignment time, but many also identified patterns of ongoing support that relied on a level of relationship or at least connection with each other. Respondent (02_3) summed up the general feeling by suggesting that the social contact ‘offered good reassurance factors at critical points in the course, i.e. normally before hand-in of assignments’ (02_3). Students also clearly outlined how these social connections practically supported their learning throughout the course. When they were questioned on whom they turned to for support in understanding content or assessments, clearly their fellow students were their first port of call.

The questionnaire included a number of questions that asked students to identify who they would contact if they had difficulty with some aspect of their learning. These questions were broken up to distinguish between difficulties such as understanding a
reading versus understanding what was required of them for an assignment. This was done in order to gauge whether students made a judgement about the value of their connections with each other when facing different kinds of difficulties. For example, for an understanding of a weekly reading they may well have been happy to rely on a fellow student’s interpretation. However, on critical matters of assessment, I was keen to understand if they would choose to confirm details with their teachers rather than rely on a fellow student’s interpretation. Surprisingly, when discussing whom they contacted for clarification of either a reading or an assignment, students reported that they were most likely to contact a fellow student before they would contact a staff member to talk about the problem. This clearly indicated that these students trusted their fellow student’s interpretation and that they had the level of connection with fellow students that they felt provided a basis of trust.

The emotional support these students experienced included both encouragement with their studies and a sense of a shared life experience. Importantly, some of these students, like the mature age student CS4 in the first case, also identified the issue of confidence in returning to study and the importance of social connections with other students that would allow them to check they were ‘making progress’ (06_3) and to ensure they were ‘providing support in the dark moments!’ (03_2). The following response brings together many of these elements and also conveys the reciprocal nature of the types of connections students made with each other:

Yes halfway through most of the assignments. I had quite lengthy but rewarding phone conversations with one of the students. In the early part of the course [program] (Predominantly the business studies area) I needed some help but in the later, more technical areas I was of more help to my fellow student. (06_3)
So these students had clearly identified that ‘community’ was important in supporting their learning. Many of them had put significant effort into creating connections with each other and could clearly say how these support networks were of assistance in their learning. Did these students also experience the same tensions in managing their studies in the context of having family lives and work pressures, and did these pressures have implications for them, their engagement with each other and the failure of the VSS?

*Was the ‘work-life-study balance’ issue also apparent in this case?*

The students from the first case study, who were mostly part-time students, had clearly identified that one of the issues for them in developing social learning support networks was trying to balance study with the other commitments in their life. For the students from Sheffield, nine of the sixteen at some point in their responses made unsolicited comments about the pressure of trying to balance work, family life and study. For many, it became a dominant theme around which they started to explore their use of the VSS and their engagement in the overall program and each other.

In talking about not using the VSS, some students reacted almost with anger over the idea that they would be expected to engage with one another in the space:

> I don’t find it of value to the academic nature of the course. I have clear ideas about what I want to achieve and believe these to be met through study rather than an exchange of ideas in the way that the VSS facilitates. As a distance learner I am not on the course to gain further social contacts and as such don’t really find enough time to just ‘hang out’ in the VSS. That is, I work hard and late, I have studies to do and somewhere fit in a social life. This schedule does not leave time to engage in VSS – ing (03_1)
Clearly this student felt they needed to make fine judgements about the respective value of spending time trying to engage in the VSS compared with working fulltime and completing their studies. This student was also one of the four that choose to do an online course because they preferred to study alone, but he also choose to meet up with other students the night before workshop days. Interestingly, this has some resonance with comments from students in the first case study, in that clearly the program workshop days provided the structure around which incidental contact could occur. From this incidental contact the students started to use these days as a way of formalising their connections with each other - even those students like (03_1) who didn’t really assign any real ‘academic’ value to building connections with fellow students but still chose to attend the dinners and drinks.

For one student, this work-life-study balance pressure was evident even while she was filling out the questionnaire:

_I've filled this in quickly this morning. I hope I've filled it in correctly, it's just I haven't much time and have taken the day off to study myself. Basically though I tend to keep in touch with a few fellow students by email and rarely use the Web CT and VSS facilities. (07_3)_

However, even given the pressures, this student still maintained regular contact with one student who had left the course as well as having ongoing email and telephone contact with a number of other students. She also caught up with other students regularly when she visited Sheffield for the program workshop days.

Certainly for some of these students there was a clear sense that their engagement in postgraduate studies was just one aspect of their lives, rather than providing a single basis for their sense of identity (like being a student) as it had for the undergraduate
students. The following comment not only illustrates the place of the program in this student’s life, but also reveals some of the tensions in balancing study and home life:

My cultural space involves family, work colleagues, work contacts, friends, neighbours, the office, the gym, the holiday home etc. many of which share the same cultural space. I also have another more distant section of my cultural space and that is the students on the ITM course, which is not shared by any other person within my own cultural zone. .... There is also the time element – I have (and consequently my partner has) given up a lot of actual social time to do these studies. It goes against the grain for me (but particularly for my partner) to swap this for virtual social time! (06_3)

For some, the pressures of balancing work and study were linked to their use of the online environment. Any technical difficulties they had with that environment represented ‘time wasted’. Some had developed coping strategies that clearly operated outside of the online learning environment. The following response details some aspects of these issues but also demonstrates how students used connections with each other to alleviate some of these pressures and, more importantly, how they set about redefining their own learning environment into a form that would help them achieve their learning goals more directly:

Our chat room experiences weren’t very successful, due to work and family commitments we were all at different stages in our reading and personally I felt that the others that had more time and were further ahead increased the pressure on me. My colleague and I both found that we got more from discussing the situation amongst ourselves. (02_1)

Even though many students commented at some point on the pressures they experienced trying to meet their study obligations while engaging meaningfully in the rest of their lives with family, friends and work, most still felt that their social connections with each other supported their studies and eased this pressure, rather than contributing to it in the form of further demands:

Understand that your own problems are not yours alone and others struggle with the level of work involved while working full time, (04_2)
So while these competing ‘work-life-study’ pressures were a vivid part of the student’s experience, they had also said that they believed community in the form of social learning support networks were important. They had been able to detail how they developed and how they supported their learning – but they had not chosen to use the VSS created to further support the development of community within this program. Clearly it was useful to explore why.

**Why didn’t the students use the VSS?**

Dr Nunes and his colleagues reported that after some initial use, the students had largely stopped visiting the VSS. It is clear from analyzing students’ responses that their reasons for not using the VSS can be broadly categorized into three areas: issues with the design of the site; issues with the implementation of the site, and; the existence of other more familiar or commonly used communication channels that served the students well. However, before reporting on each of these areas it is important to firstly get a sense of how many of the students surveyed had actually used the site and to explore what students found useful about the VSS.

Thirteen of the sixteen students who responded to the questionnaire had visited the site at least once. Of the three that had never visited, one was just not interested, a second did not feel it was relevant and the third student’s response suggested that for a mix of practical and technical reasons, the VSS was far from integrated into their common pattern of engagement in the MA in ITM program: ‘I find the internet
extremely slow from home in the evenings so I would tend to use e-mail from work. Probably because of this I just don't think about using it’ (02_2).

Of the thirteen students that had visited the site, nine talked about how they believed this type of site could be of use, and a few had gone into the site again as a result of deciding to fill out the survey and found ‘lots of interesting and useful stuff’ (06_1). As one student commented:

Yes – only after you prompted me in this questionnaire! I found the past student information very useful – their experiences, tips on studying, time management, etc. helped me to keep going. (05_2)

A number of students reported other useful aspects of the site and provided suggestions about how it might be improved. However, most of these suggestions related to using the site for the provision of information rather than for the development of connections between students. This clearly related to the need for the site to be seen as having some purpose or academic value in order for students to spend time in it. All thirteen students who had visited the site suggested there needed to be some sort of incentive for students visiting the VSS in order to encourage greater use by students.

This idea that students require some sort of incentive to access and engage in the online environment (either in the form of assessable tasks or because this is the only place students can gain certain necessary information) points to one contested debate within the literature (O'Reilly and Newton 2002). Certainly, these questions strike at the heart of how to design effective online learning environments, and to some extent, this debate also has relevance with individual educators’ views on the nature of adult
education and the adoption of different theories of learning (e.g. constructivist verses behaviourist). However, this debate could also be seen in a slightly different light.

When students suggested that the VSS needed incentives for students to access it, they were clearly implying the site was neither integrated into their normal patterns of engaging with the online course sites, nor was it integrated into their normal patterns of engaging with each other. To go to the VSS site, they had to log into a completely different site and some of their course modules didn’t even have hyperlinks to the VSS. The site was in no way part of the normal ebb and flow of their life as an online student. Clearly this lack of integration was important to explore, as it was a result of both the design of the VSS and its implementation.

**Issues with the design of the VSS site:**

The idea of keeping the VSS site from being integrated into the rest of the program’s WebCT sites was actually a design decision made by the program team. It was believed that if the site appeared in the online environment as just another WebCT unit within the suite of online courses, the students would not differentiate the site from the individual course module environments. This site was to be inhabited and maintained by students. However, students felt there was too much overlap of information with other online resources, or that the visual design of the site was just not appealing. This student’s comments are typical:

*If we knew that this was ‘the place’ to obtain the information and everything was available through a single access point then it would be used more. The current arrangement seems a little fragmented and I tend to go to the message board for the current module only. (05_2)*

*Although I have used the space, I think there is a bit of an identity/design issue – it is (deliberately) different from the general discussion area for the current*
module but does not really ‘feel’ like a dynamic area or the right interface to engage people and keep them coming back. (05_2)

For another student, the idea of creating a single site for all relevant course and program information was likely to be the best way of ensuring students would use it:

*I think assignment titles and info should be posted here and not handed out on hard copies – this would mean that students would have a real incentive to visit the space. At the moment it’s just an ‘added extra’ and certainly in my case I really don’t go there unless somebody is hounding me to! … unless you provide students with a real incentive to visit, they won’t bother!* Maybe vital pieces of information (assignment titles? Day school info?) could be posted there – students could then be emailed an alert to tell us that new information is available with perhaps a link to the relevant login page. This would increase visits! (04_3)

For others there was a belief that the site should be of a more “academic nature” or contain more program-wide and relevant academic information such as ‘More up-to-date information on relevant journals or individual articles (05_2). Students were not asking that this information be directly related to a specific course, but as a way of initiating broader academic discussion on topics relevant to the Sheffield students:

*Yes, more specific academic information rather than just peripheral type stuff, i.e., names and numbers. I’d like to see discussions initiated by academic staff, a kind of directed learning. What are the pertinent areas of research in a particular field? What are the current hot-topics etc? … If the site had relevant academic information I would find this beneficial. As stated before, a hot-topic, current affairs, news, forums coming up, activities that Sheffield or other Unis are running detailing specifically to the content of this course would be great, but since it isn’t there for current students, I don’t see it getting done for future ones…(re: continued access to VSS after Grad.)? (03_1)*

Ironically, given the low student use of the VSS, the type of environment described by respondent (03_1) matches closely some of the key aspects of what Wenger (2001) describes as the foundational elements for the building of a community of learners within a tertiary academic environment. The idea that the site needed to be designed so that it was both integrated into a student’s online experience and have some
academic relevance was prevalent. The following student’s comments envision an environment that is more holistic, a site designed to be the foundation of their pattern of engagement in the online world as part of being a student in the program:

*The Virtual Social Space has some good elements but seems ‘cut-off’ from the module areas and I feel it would be possible to have a single point of entry (one screen) where the individual could access all information. This screen should display what has been updated, where there are new messages (and how many), thus having a more immediately dynamic feel to the whole experience of logging in and checking what is happening. (05_2)*

Many of the students’ comments implied the need for a high level of staff engagement and interaction on the site. This directly challenged the initial design idea for the site, namely that the VSS should be ‘a student site’, managed by the students with little or no engagement from the program team. In analysing many of the students’ comments, it is difficult to separate out the issues of design from the students’ experience of the implementation of the VSS site, but it was clear students expected a higher level of interaction from the space.

**Issues with the implementation of the site:**

Obviously once a site such as the VSS has been constructed, there is an implementation phase that might be expected to encourage students to use the site, and help students to own, inhabit and change the site as they see fit. However the Sheffield site failed to achieve this. It is interesting to examine students’ reaction to the site after those first few months, and explore what relevance their experiences had in understanding the significance of community for students or how a constructed online environment might facilitate the formation of community. There were initiators amongst the students who were willing to explore the site, use it and make
contributions. Equally, it seemed many of them felt they were “flying solo”, i.e. they felt they did not get a lot of support from staff in the program.

One respondent summed up the overall feelings of many of the students when they commented ‘There is an inertia thing, no-one uses it so no-one uses it’ (01_3). For the students who had completed the questionnaire, although many of them had visited the site early on and many of them had made contributions, they generally felt that the site was not “lived” in by the program student community in general or that it had ever achieved a feeling of being a live, dynamic environment. This would seem to have some relationship to the student’s expectation of the activity on the site and the type of responses they should get from the site (or more importantly the other people using the site). The mismatch between their expectations and their experiences resulted in a sense of frustration for many of the respondents:

I found that some were just “listeners” or “lurkers”. In the early days I was one of the more prolific posters and I really wanted to make it work, but after a while I felt as though I was talking to myself and lost heart in it. (06_3)

In understanding how a site becomes “live” or feels “lived in”, it seems that there are two important, interrelated factors to consider. Firstly, there is the modelling of behaviour in a site by those wanting to foster community. Secondly, there is the moderation of the site. This moderation role includes the monitoring of behaviour to ensure that people’s engagement with each other is in keeping with the intended spirit of the site (e.g. no “spamming” or “flaming”), as well as responding with feedback where appropriate as a way of modelling behaviour for other students and also to ensure that those who make contributions feel heard, and that it is seen that their contributions are part of a discussion or debate (Salmon 2001). Typically a moderator of a site would identify the initiator students early on in the implementation phase and
respond to their postings or engagement with the site. The modelling of this behaviour both ensures the initiators are responded to (and encourages them to keep contributing) but also provides the ‘listeners and lurkers’ (06_3) commented about with the opportunity to witness the type of interaction desired in the space. Over time, the moderator may also pose questions designed to encourage those who haven’t participated to provide a contribution to the discussion. After examining several of the students’ responses it is easy to identify the role played by the absence of these factors:

(I have been into the VSS) about half a dozen times to check if there are any news. Sadly, there is not much social chit chats. (01_1)

More discussion would be possible between students but it seems to be the persistent few that continue to use the message board – some people have not submitted a single message or reply! (05_2)

(Accessed the VSS about) 10 times – just to see if anything has changed / arrived... Not much point in having it if only a few of us enter anything. (06_2)

These comments clearly imply that these students took the time to engage with the site, but on seeing little change they were not sure what to do next. For many it would seem, having got no response to their postings, or seeing little activity to convince them that others were making use of the space, this lack of moderation and modelling of behaviour led the initiators to stop engaging with the site. This final comment from one of the students really highlighted how the VSS was simply not a place to “hang out” or even be “seen” in:

The VSS as a social space is akin to sitting alone in a bar with no atmosphere drinking diet Tango and, just before you leave, jot a cryptic message to say that you have been there on a post it note and stick it on the fruit machine. (a bit sad really) (06_3)
Issues with design and implementation of the VSS aside, these students actually did manage to maintain a strong sense of connection with each other that both supported them emotionally and supported their learning. To maintain these connections (formed with each other via the program workshop days) they used familiar and established methods of communication, such as email and the telephone to maintain these personal networks.

**The use of established and familiar communication mediums:**

From analysing the students’ responses both about their thoughts on community, their patterns of communication and their engagement with the VSS, it was clear that the space created by the VSS - even if it had been better designed and implemented better - would probably still not have added much value to their overall experience of the program. It seems that the well-established and familiar communication mediums of email and the telephone gave students what they were looking for. Importantly for students, communication via these mediums was reliable and, unlike other computer-mediated-communication facilities, required no extra effort to understand, learn and operate.

While several students commented on some technical difficulties accessing both the WebCT course sites and the VSS, and while many reported they felt uncomfortable with mediums like chat environments and discussion boards, all said they felt at home with email. Typical of the students’ comments, the following three responses capture the mix of issues discussed:
Because the bulletin board was under construction and changing during the time I spent on the course I believe that it never featured as an important element in my learning. The difficulties experienced in accessing the system and delays in obtaining the vital passwords all conspired to make the use of this space difficult. Because I travel between home and work, pressure of time didn’t help, as I could only gain access at weekends, this coupled with the fact that the area was only used by a minority of the group certainly in the first year all conspired to devalue this area as a useful tool for learning and communication. My experience of communication by e-mail or phone with fellow students and tutors has been much more rewarding. (02_3)

At the beginning we were all keen to use the chat room facilities. However, after a few months most of us seemed to have other commitments when the agreed chats were scheduled. I enjoyed the chats at the beginning, but after a few sessions I found it boring, I prefer to chat on the phone. (01_1)

I’m afraid I don’t really use the VSS at all. I’m not sure that I would either. I think that this is partly due to time and effort, but also because I am not as familiar with this technology. I like to use email as it’s quick and easy, but I’m not a huge fan of chat facilities or discussion boards, plus my Internet connection is often slow. I would rather speak to people individually via email. I think if I was more familiar with the technology and used it regularly in other settings, for example at work, I would probably use it for my degree. If there was something there that I had to access in order to complete the course I would definitely use it, but to date I have managed ok by using email. (07_3)

It is significant that fifteen of the sixteen (93%) students regularly used email to maintain social contact with friends and relatives. They sent an average of thirteen emails a week that they defined as social emails. Given this high level of email use in their professional and private lives, it is not surprising that email was also the preferred mode of communication in their student life. Time and time again, and in different parts of the questionnaire, students commented on their reliance on email or the telephone as their main communication medium to clarify issues about assessment, to discuss content and to arrange social gathering with other students. Given this group of students’ high level of usage and preference for existing communication mediums, it is not surprising that the communication tools provided within the VSS (the discussion boards, chat environments and social calendars) added
little additional value to their existing methods of developing learning support networks.

The students’ preferred use of email as a medium to maintain networks with each other raised two important points relevant to both the use of the VSS and to the significance of community for this group of students. Firstly, since most of the second and third year students had already made connections with each other prior to the introduction of the VSS, they had already established common communication patterns and cultures that supported them in maintaining connections with each other; the VSS added little value. Interestingly, because the VSS was opened to students from all years of the program, naturally the first year students that didn’t know each other at this point may well have chosen to use the environment more if it had been designed better and if they had felt, as a cohort, they owned the space. Secondly, the development of email networks between these students clearly seemed to be linked to the infrastructure for incidental social contact created by the program workshop days. These days provided the type of opportunity for students to bump into each other that the students from the first case described and, importantly, for students to slowly develop the type of trust connections with other students that became the foundations for the building of their future social learning support networks.

_Implications of this case: the questions answered and the new questions it raised._

Like the first case study of undergraduate Social Science students at RMIT, the Sheffield group of postgraduate students confirmed the value of social connections in supporting their learning in a tertiary environment. These students also commented
on the stresses of completing studies while also working and managing to spend time with their family and friends. However, these students framed their social connections with each other as supporting them in their studies, even in the context of trying to balance study with their work and family commitments.

In a strange and unexpected way this group of students also confirmed the role played by the space of the physical campus (in the form of the program workshop days in this case) for providing opportunities for people to initially meet, engage, build trust and form connections. For these students, after making connections with each other on the workshop days, they relied on familiar communication methods, such as email and telephone, to build their networks of support. In trying to understand why students didn’t use the VSS, it was useful to examine and reflect on their responses in the context of the literature discussing the development of online learning communities. It is clear that students identified a number of issues that involved both the design and implementation of the site, including the asynchronous nature of the environment and the lack of integration of this site into their courses. However, students also identified that existing communication mediums/methods already served them well, and clearly for these students there was a sense that the VSS was not a ‘lived’ site and therefore, after initially visiting the VSS, many students found little response to their engagement and others found little reason to continue to visit the site. Indeed, many authors offer advice for the developers of online courses that clearly discuss the importance of integrating social engagement into the learning environment plus the need for online spaces to be moderated and monitored in order for students to get timely feedback and a sense of presence from their engagement (Clark 1999; Ferry et

While this advice is clearly offered in the context of developing course-level social engagement, rather than attempting to provide a whole-of-program social environment such as the Sheffield team attempted with the VSS, the idea of creating an environment that feels ‘lived-in’ does seem to have some resonance for those studying online. The literature suggests that through the modeling of behavior by some participants, the moderation and feedback for student contributions and possibly with the capacity for students to engage in some sort of synchronous or ‘live’ environment, that students may well create a sense of online presence which facilitates the development of online connection between students (Conrad 2002). The findings from the first case study and the Sheffield students also suggests the importance of having an integrated environment where student contact with each other is part of their normal patterns of engagement with the online learning environment, rather than a separate space that requires a different process of engagement.

It is clear that this case had provided some indicators of the type of online social environments that didn’t work, while providing some clues about how to construct an environment that might feel lived in. While the question of how we construct a learning environment that supports the development of learning communities is important for all students who study online, both these cases have highlighted that students will use whatever face-to-face or on-campus engagement they have access to in order to make connections with each other. However, for those students who are
solely studying online this option is not available. For students whose only learning environment is constructed in the online world - whose only opportunity to meet their fellow students is through the online learning environment educators create for them - understanding how they might create connections with each other is important. Did the type of online environment that could support this type of connection exist? Was it used within a learning context to create a learning environment for tertiary students? How would behavior be modeled in this environment to encourage students to engage beyond their responses to the moderator/lecturer? Could the support they gave each other be observed within a public online learning environment (as opposed to the private email environment)? Would students use this type of environment if provided, or would they continue to rely on the existing common infrastructure such as email? Would it offer different opportunities for students to engage that might allow them to develop the initial connections with each other, as opposed to just building on existing relationships (such as email facilitates)? These were all questions that would require an exploration of a very different virtual environment to those created within typical course management systems.
Chapter 5: The Third Case Study - The MOO: Do Electronic Cows Dream of Community?

Around the time I was completing the analysis of the data from the second case, I read a paper by Andrea Chester and Gillian Gwynne (1998) that reported on their experiences of teaching in a virtual environment that was very different from those generally provided in a CMS. Chester and Gwynne had developed a virtual learning environment for one of their courses that actually replicated a campus and contained a familiar context for students to engage in. The virtual RMIT University campus environment was created in a MOO (Multi user dimensions-Object-Oriented) and contained hallways, staff offices, classrooms, student rooms, cafes, courtyards, and so forth, through which students wandered as part of their daily experience of being ‘at Uni’ – bumping into each other, playing jokes on each other and leaving their physical mark on this virtual world through the creation and movement of objects. This environment seemed to transform the virtual space of the constructed online learning environment into a place students could inhabit. It suggested a useful point of comparison with the other two case studies. Could a virtual environment replicate some of the ‘facilitating structures’ Hung and Chen (2001) described, that would support their engagement with each other? What would this environment look like? Would students use it to connect with each other and develop social learning support networks? Could I actually observe student interactions as they occurred, in order to understand the role of the constructed virtual learning environment in the development of social learning support networks?
Turning space into place

The previous two case studies suggested that online learning environments, provided within CMS’s, struggle to replicate the kind of spaces in which many on-campus students develop social connections with each other. Burbules (2000, p. 328) provides an excellent discussion on the conditions that are part of ‘the dynamic of creating and identifying a community’, suggesting these conditions include: mediating conditions, political conditions, and conditions of space and place. His discussion of space and place provides a framework for understanding some of the differences experienced by students between the physical campus and the type of environment students encounter when entering an online module delivered via a CMS.

Burbules (2000, p. 333) suggests that ‘spatial arrangements and practices can be viewed as ways of shaping and constraining the possibilities of community’ and that these arrangements and practices are really about space becoming place. Place is all about a sense of being there, of familiarity, of recognizing that one has been there before, and in that familiarity we have a sense of how to act, how to be in that space as opposed to another space. Burbules (2000, p. 333) suggests it is ‘the familiarity of the space and the familiarity of the activities characteristic of it [that] create and support one another.’ Burbules (2000, p. 333) sums this up brilliantly when he suggests, ‘We know where we are when we know what we are supposed to do’. In an educational setting, while each room may have four walls, the way we act in a workshop space will be different to the way we act in a lecture theatre. Just as the way we act in the library will be different to the way we act in the student common room. The established culture of the space (the shared expectations of what happens within that space) informs both our actions and our presence in that space.
The second important factor enabling ‘space’ to become ‘place’ that Burbules suggests is the capacity of individuals to create, alter and transform a space. He argues, ‘In living their daily lives, people seek out spaces and reshape them according to the patterns of their needs and desires … (and) these needs and desires are reshaped by the spaces available to them.’ (Burbules 2000, p. 334). The single-dimension type of space created within most online learning environments does not create this same sense of place. For those courses operating within a CMS such as ‘Blackboard’, there is little architectural differentiation between courses. Blackboard, one of the most common CMS’s, has a standard set of menu options that until recently could not be edited. So, for students, logging into one course looks virtually the same as logging into any other at that institution, even though the content and learning activities will be quite different. While this uniformity of interface assists users in navigating their way around the environment, it is difficult to get a sense of the difference in ‘feel’ of the environment compared to that of another course. However, for Burbules (2000, p. 345), the more critical factor is the lack of opportunity or capacity for students to ‘customize and adapt (learning) spaces to one’s own preferences and habits’, noting the ‘contents of Web sites, the links between resources, and so on, are determined by the authors/designers of these spaces, and are not subject to modification by the casual user’.

While Burbules’ arguments appear congruent in the context of the structural boundaries created by the internal software architecture of many CMS based courses, it is less clear that they would be appropriate if we could take online learning

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6 Now that Blackboard has formally taken over WebCT (the other major CMS), the dominance of this approach to CMS’s design is compounded by a lack of competition in the market.
environments out of the single dimension online classroom (albeit with a ‘café’ in the corner of the room). If we could truly create a multi-dimensional environment in which students wandered around, got lost, bumped into each other, joked with each other, got to define the colour of their clothes that day and what they were carrying around Uni with them, all in real time (synchronous), then it is possible that the nature of that environment would be more aligned to that ‘place’ we call a campus. It is exactly this capacity to create objects (from items to carry around to whole rooms) and the capacity to alter them at will, to extend a sense of social presence, to extend a sense of one’s own identity, to create a sense of ‘place’, which makes MOO’s such an interesting learning environment.

**What is a MOO anyway?**

To understand a MOO (MUD-Object-Oriented) one needs to understand what a MUD (Multi user dimension) is. Roy Trubshaw, a student at Essex University, developed the first MUD in 1979 as a computer version of the game Dungeons and Dragons (Burka 1993). While these game spaces initially ran on localised computer networks, there are now massive online ‘worlds’ in the form of game systems such as Norrath, run by the Sony Corporation, with over half a million subscribers and South Korea's Lineage, with over 2.5 million subscribers (Dodson 2002). These online worlds usually have well over 100,000 users logged on at any one time (Dodson 2002). Although these virtual worlds, unlike most MOO’s used in an educational setting, now have spectacular graphics and accompanying audio, they have their roots in the original concepts used to design MUD’s and MOO’s. So what are these virtual spaces
and how are they different from other online environments like web pages and CMS’s, and how do they relate to education?

There are three dimensions of the virtual environment that MUD’s (and MOO’s) create that are important when exploring these spaces as different from the type of space created in a CMS. There is a sense of location, a sense of identity, and finally, the capacity for users to create and alter objects. Although individual MUD’s may have unique qualities, Burka (1993, p. 1) notes that ‘most have the following characteristics: several people can play at once; the game is partitioned into virtual spaces ("rooms") such that people and objects in one room cannot directly interact with people and objects in another room; all interaction takes place in text, not pictures or sounds’. Creating the spatial distinctions between rooms is very important because it parallels aspects of the real world, such as the fact that when people in a room are talking, people in an adjacent room cannot see them or hear them unless they come into the room. One can choose to join someone in another room by either being transferred to the space (via a @join command) or you can choose to walk through the various gardens, corridors and stairways until you get to the room - bumping into others on the way. As Clodius (1994, para. 24) suggests, this creates a sense of place through location ‘The sense of "being" somewhere is reinforced by the illusion of moving through spaces - one types "north", the description of the room changes, the objects in the room are different, and different options exist.’

Hand in hand with this sense of place is the capacity to create, alter and move objects as well as define one’s identity (by representing species, gender and appearance). Membership of most MOO’s provide the user with the capacity to create objects to
furnish their own room space (often called a ‘dorm’); to develop objects to carry around with them (everything from enchanted mythical objects to their own pet dog); and the capacity to move these and other objects created by fellow MOO members around the MOO. These objects are created with qualities that relate to the use of the object. For example, a comfortable lounge in a café can have the feature that only those sitting on the lounge can hear (see the text of) others that are also sitting on that lounge. Another example is the white boards and notice boards used in classrooms, foyers or seminar spaces. These objects are created with the capacity to be ‘written’ upon and ‘read’, allowing users to contribute to a discussion, leave a message for a friend in their dorm room or submit a piece of work to a teacher via the blackboard in a classroom.

Even though all these objects are defined only through text, people in the MOO treat and interact with these objects as though they are real, sitting on chairs, handing or throwing smaller objects around, and the like (Clodius 1994). It is this capacity to define their own identity and create objects (something Carroll et al call ‘end-user authoring’) that allows users to extend a sense of their own identity into the MOO in the form of a social presence into the space (Carroll et al 2001). Importantly, this social presence also includes the use of humour through the creation of objects whose role is simply to create a laugh amongst those present at that point in time. This real time interaction means that even though objects remain in the MOO when users log off (usually wherever they are left or last used), the social interactions that occurred around these objects happened only for those present at that time. As such, users often tell stories of funny events and relay practical jokes to each other when they meet up again in the MOO. There is this sense of there being a shared history experienced by
those present that contributes to the engagement and the sense of the social space existing in the MOO. There is a sense that life goes on in the MOO whether you are physically there or not, and it is this factor which draws people into the MOO and creates the opportunity for incidental contact between people that assists the development of support relationships in this virtual world.

**The saMOOrai MOO and the virtual RMIT Tokyo Campus**

The RMIT course, *Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, was offered by the Department of Psychology and Disability Studies as an elective to undergraduate students from a diverse range of disciplines. This course was delivered in mixed delivery mode (first eleven weeks off-campus, twelfth week on-campus) between 1999 and 2004. The online medium was particularly suited for this course because the objective of the course was to explore concepts of identity and community in cyberspace. The course design team initially delivered the course using the online learning environment *Firstclass* for the first two years. However from 2001, the course began to be delivered via the virtual RMIT Tokyo Building in the saMOOrai MOO.

The design of the course allowed students to explore the concepts of identity and community in cyberspace, both in relation to themselves and their fellow students, by assuming an identity of their choosing (including name, gender and species) to operate within the MOO and in their wider explorations of net-based communities. The students completed a number of activities for the course that required them to both explore new aspects of their own sense of identity and to explore life in the virtual world represented by their time in the MOO and in other online communities.
they visited. Students were required to keep a journal online (which only the teaching staff had access to), to make contributions to several topic blackboards (discussion boards) set up in specific rooms within the MOO, and to attend three real-time conferences held in the MOO. These conferences had specific themes: agreeing on netiquette; a gallery viewing of objects students had made in the MOO which represented their idea of the WWW; and a discussion about online relationships. The students met with the other members of the course for the first time in the final week and only then were their true identities revealed to each other.

This course provided an ideal case study for the purpose of this research both because of the anonymity required by the participants and because of the contained nature of the virtual environment. The anonymity of participants required during the first eleven weeks of the course ensured that the social contact that developed between the students was not based on prior association, but rather on the interactions that could only occur directly within the MOO. Likewise, the MOO itself provided an observable environment that was self-contained and could be logged by me when I was actually in the environment.

**Key elements explored in this case**

While the other two case studies had provided evidence of the significance of community for students and the value of social learning support networks, the environment of the MOO was fundamentally synchronous and provided a metaphorical experience of a campus. This case allowed me to explore a number of issues and questions, some relating to issues raised by the previous two case studies.
and some related specifically to the unusual environment of the MOO. Specific to this case study, a series of questions arose. What were students’ expectations of developing a sense of community with each other? Did these students also think community was important to their learning and why? How did these students relate (formally and informally) in this environment? Did incidental meetings also play a part in the connections developed between students? How did the ephemeral nature of the dialogue in the medium of the MOO alter a student’s input? How was behaviour modelled in this medium? What cues in the medium assisted/hindered a student’s participation? Were there any concrete examples of the social connections developing that assisted a student’s learning? How did these students turn 'space' into 'place'?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This case study, unlike the previous two, involved the use of an environment while students were actually engaged in the course. As a researcher, this provided me with the opportunity to use fundamentally different approaches to data collection because I was no longer asking students to recall their experiences. Rather, I had the opportunity to observe them when they were in their environment. Therefore a number of different methods of data collection were used to investigate the student interactions and the development of social learning support networks over the twelve-week period. These methods included daily observation of life in the MOO; analysis of both the student’s journals as they created them and the logged informal and formal sessions within the MOO; and finally, the use of a survey to gather students’ reflections on a number of specific issues which arose after analysis of the other data.
In this case study, the logged observations of day-to-day life in the MOO ran parallel to the students’ creation of their journals. Analysis of both these data sets informed the ongoing day-to-day discussions and encounters in the MOO and the development of the final survey.

**Who was in the MOO**

It is not possible to provide the standard demographic information about the students in this case because their gender, age and identity were all kept secret from each other as part of the designed learning process for the course. However it is possible to say that there were fifteen students enrolled, two teaching staff, a technical support person and myself in the MOO most days (plus anyone else that just happened to be visiting the MOO at the time, which included students from Japan and a few visitors from the USA). All those enrolled in the course were undergraduate students. During the 12-week course, I was logged into the MOO on a daily basis and interacted with all the students, teachers and technical staff present during the times I was logged in. Twelve of the students provided me with access to their journals as they wrote them (via an online system) and eight responded to a questionnaire that canvassed questions that arose from the analysis of the transcripts and their journals.
Findings of this case study

In reporting the findings from this case I have used a slightly different format from the previous two case studies because of the real-time nature of the environment. In the previous two case studies, the use of a question and answer format reflected the data collection methods used, and, in a sense, my experience of gathering and analysing the data. This case used a far more iterative, ethnographic style of data collection and the analysis, which resulted in a more thematic form of discovery, was based on the lived actions of the students in their environment. As such, the findings from this case can be reported via four interrelated sections that not only reflect the specific issues and questions discussed earlier, but also describe the capacity of students to author, or what Carroll et al (2001) call ‘end-user authoring’ in this type of environment. I ask firstly, what was a student’s expectation of building a community and was it important to them and their learning? Then, how did students behave in the MOO, how was this behaviour modelled and what effect did the MOO environment itself have on their interactions? Thirdly, how did these students turn the MOO space into a place? And finally I ask, what evidence was there of this space providing a community for some or all of the students?

Students’ Expectations

Students’ expectations of becoming a community were mixed. Interestingly, those students that were more experienced in the online, virtual world environment who had previously participated in other MOO's or who had experience in chat facilities, had a higher expectation of developing connections with fellow students. Typical examples
of students’ comments listed below illustrate this ambivalence about the prospects of developing a sense of community and the possible reasons why this might be:

I do not have much expectations since we hardly get to chat online and offline. I just suppose we will be casual friends. The hi-bye friend if you know what I mean.:) This I presume is due to the minimal contact we have with one another. (Cs3_Aerith)

I didn’t really expect to make much of a connection with most of the people because I generally connect with people who I have had shared experiences with / they have helped me / I have helped them. (Cs3_Bunkka)

My expectations of creating lasting friendships were not high. This was due to the brief length of the course (Cs3_EnLiGhTeN_OnE)

I didn’t really expect to make any strong connections or friendships with any one. I thought the class would be more of a questions and answer type class not an actual virtual community as such. (Cs3_Mango)

Inexperienced virtual environment users had experiences like those of students in the previous two cases. Most notably, Cs3_Bunkka’s suggestion that the formation of a community relies on shared experiences and the opportunity to help others, mirrors the actual experiences of on-campus life for students from the first case. Conversely, Cs3_Mango’s expectation of the learning environment in which they would be expected to complete the course was, like some of the students from Sheffield, more aligned with an electronic form of Richardson’s (2000) definition of a traditional paper-based Distance Education model. This is in contrast to Cs3_Wicketwarrick who was an experienced virtual environment user and engaged with the course in the hope of making new connections with people based on his/her previous experience of life in a virtual world:

I was definitely hoping to make some online friends, and I think I managed to achieve this. Whether or not the feeling is
mutual is dependant on the other person. I enjoy meeting new people and seeing what experiences they have had, and in an online community, people tend to be less worried about talking about themselves, and usually you learn a lot more about them then in any other situation. (Cs3_Wicketwarrick)

This course, unlike a core course studied within a set program, was offered as an elective to students from a wide variety of disciplines from across the university. As there was no 'student cohort' relating to a specific program, it is reasonable to assume that students did not have a high expectation of developing a community. Given that students would be unlikely to continue formal contact after the completion of this course, the investment in developing the connections with each other probably outweighed the perceived benefit. This is borne out in the students’ comments above.

This, coupled with the fact that students’ identities are assumed (so not even basic factors such as gender and age may be accurate) and that the course expressly forbids students from contacting or meeting up with each other outside of the course MOO until the final week (in order to maintain and provide the appropriate environment to explore their chosen identity), were all likely to have contributed to students’ low expectations about developing a community while studying in the MOO. The fact that those students, already experienced in relating to others in virtual worlds, had a higher expectation of developing a sense of connection, suggests that their previous experiences in MOO’s or chat type of environments meant that the factors relating to identity were possibly not as significant in the development of trust between members of net communities as suggested by early authors on community and the internet such as Donath (1999) and Hawthorne (1999). Another factor in this may have been that these more experienced students brought a sense of play into the MOO almost immediately, and this seemed important in the modelling of behaviour and ensured these students started to get ‘known’ by other MOO users very early on.
Even though most students in this course initially had low expectations of developing a community, when questioned on the value of community, all respondents clearly believed that the development of social connection, which enabled them to seek or provide support to each other, were important elements of student life and supported their learning process. The following are typical of students’ responses from this course.

_I believe it does affect my results in my study. If the sense of connection is stronger, everyone will log on to MOO more often, get to chat more often, get information much faster and more reliable etc. I guess its part of studying, studying has always been a group/community thing for me. So it does affect how well I can do._ (Cs3_Aerith)

_I do. Interaction at least is important otherwise you may as well read a book at home. By sharing study and a subject with people who are doing the same thing, different viewpoints are seen. Also, people doing the same subjects often have the same interests._ (Cs3_Bunkka)

_During my degree, such a feeling (of community) envelops nearly all members of my course. It has to develop, because you spend 4 years of your life in close proximity to a limited number of ppl. In first year, you learn all the faces, in second year you learn all the names, and third and 4th, you make personal contact. Also, some students are good at certain subjects, so u learn who to go to for help, advice, and everyone learns your strengths. So interactions between us constantly occur._ (Cs3_EnLiGhTeD_OnE)

_Yes I do feel that friendships and connection with other students is very important. I wouldn't be able to study if I didn't have this connection, as it provides me with support and a balance._ (Cs3_Mango)

_I think it is, as whilst lecturers are available for help, students are normally ur first line of defence. If anything goes wrong, I tend to talk to my fellow classmates, online or offline before going to the lecturer. This can be noted by the day that an assignment was due. Everyone was online offering help to everyone else._ (Cs3_Wicketwarrick)

In the day-to-day discussions within the MOO, most students were initially perplexed when I talked to them about community in a learning setting. However, once I talked
about social learning support networks – the idea that they might get and give support to each other and how a sense of trust might develop between them - all agreed that they had experienced this in the on-campus environment and most had started to experience something of this in the MOO (a typical example of this type of conversation can be found in the Appendix). The apparent incongruence between the students’ rejection of the abstract term ‘community’ and acceptance of the concrete concept of ‘social learning support networks’ is an interesting one. As authors from many disciplines have suggested, the term ‘community’ has become so widely used that it has been emptied of meaning (Bryson and Mowbray 1981; Lemos 1996; Bauman 2001). Clearly in each of the cases in this study, it is only when the concrete elements of what being a member of community might mean in practice are clarified, that the idea has some appeal for students. The concept of community and the concrete elements assumed by that label has always been utilitarian in nature. While Bauman (2001) suggests the idea of community has been romanticised almost into oblivion, some students still recognise the practice and practical elements encompassed by this term and behave in ways that facilitate the connection of people within the group.

Interestingly, the experienced online students often became the initiators of social connection between students, in that they were the students most likely to log into the MOO and just hang around - even if no one else was logged in. This meant that when other users checked out who was in the MOO before logging in, they found someone there and therefore logged in to greet each other. These students seemed to understand how incidental or informal meetings between students contributed or facilitated the development of connections with each other. This modelling of behaviour was an
important factor in the development of a relaxed and informal social environment or culture within the MOO.

**Behaviour in the MOO**

In unfamiliar spaces or situations, people pick up cues on how to act from others inhabiting a space. This is just as true for cyberspace. Cognisant of this behaviour, the teaching and technical staff members in the course pre-planned how they would model a relaxed, informal and helpful environment. The technical staff member was particularly crucial in this regard. It was standard practice for the technical staff member to be logged in most days in the first few weeks of the course. This modelling not only related to behaviour and how people should engage with each other, but to identity, what one could actually *be* in the MOO. The technical staff member chose a non-gendered identity (*Flemmex*) specifically to challenge the sense that one should have a gender and was available in the MOO to assist with technical issues and enquiries from students.

This modelling of behaviour as both a mix of just “hanging around” in the MOO and also being available to help others, reflects the conditions described by students from the first case study when they talked about how social learning support networks developed on campus. Students from that first case study talked about “bumping” into people in cafés or outside of class, and the connection made between people when one could offer assistance to another. The technical staff played an important role in modelling this “hanging around” behaviour for students. Their willingness to just hang around in the MOO, which meant they were logged into the MOO in the
background whenever they were at their computer, meant students had both a practical reason and an opportunity to engage with someone in the MOO. The technical staff provided assistance to students for everything they needed to “be” in the MOO. This included information on how to use the internal MOO mail system, how to create their identities, how to create objects to furnish their rooms, and how to create objects just to carry around. These very practical exchanges in the MOO allowed students to not only feel like they were working on something but they were also, as Burbules (2000) would put it, learning how to be in this space. The teaching staff chose non-human, but gendered identities (GeeGee and Tiger) and constantly modelled playful, informal behaviour. This both expanded the idea of identity for students beyond choosing a human form and modelled the type of interaction desired between inhabitants in the MOO. It set the groundwork for the development of the culture of the MOO.

The three staff in the MOO also established communication norms and etiquette by modelling appropriate acknowledgment, greetings and farewells whenever a student entered or left a room. A scan of one transcript from a logged conference session (included in the Appendix) quickly reveals how each time someone entered the conference room, the teaching staff acknowledged their entrance either directly with a welcome or else with an emoticon such as a smile or wave. Within a few weeks students started to mimic this behaviour whenever someone logged into the MOO, taking the time to wave or say ‘hi’. This not only created a relaxed atmosphere but an environment where students could ask each other questions about how to do things or how they were going. This type of interaction quickly led to students asking about each others personal lives, how they were coping with study, did they understand the
next assignment – all sorts of questions that both assisted each other and built trust between them.

Staff also modelled moving around the MOO, enhancing students’ sense of place by walking with them through the foyers and courtyards into the seminar rooms, chatting along the way, commenting of the change of weather in Tokyo, on a picture on the wall or on the smell of coffee emanating from the cafe. Staff created the social spaces and their own offices in a way that established a warm and inviting culture. The following are examples of the courtyard, the cafe, gallery, and my office, and how one could move within the MOO. In the following passages I have just logged my movement through the MOO, starting from inside my office and ending in the gallery.

LOG<:VRF

LOG <: Visiting Research Fellow
LOG <: There is a large brown desk in the corner of the office, looking beyond the desk you see Mt Fuji through the window. On the desk there is a groovy new laptop whirring away. Beside the laptop is a photo of the cutest little dog you have ever seen. As you eyes pan around the room, the aroma of fresh coffee hits you and you hear the crackle of the open fire at the other end of the room. As you move into the office you see two large, comfortable brown leather chairs, with some hip-hight bookshelves lining the walls behind them. There is a white board on the wall with a message from Surfgrrrl, the current Visiting Research Fellow, welcoming you to her office and suggesting you take a seat and have a coffee. As you move further into her office you stumble slightly on a beautiful 9ft 6in white Mal surfboard. Obviously Surfgrrrl has just returned from a surf and is off having a shower.
You see Research Statement and Students' Consent here.

Obvious exits: hall

LOG<:hall

LOG<:Ground Floor Hall
LOG<:You are standing in the hall. Off the hall are three doors, one leading to Tiger's Office, one leading to GeeGee's Office and a third leading to the Visiting Research Fellow's Office. At the north end of the hall is a courtyard. The seminar rooms open off this courtyard.
Obvious exits: foyer, Courtyard, Tiger's Office, upstairs, GeeGee's Office, and Visiting Research Fellow

LOG <: courtyard

LOG <: Courtyard
LOG <: You are standing in the Courtyard. There is a shallow reflecting pool over which hangs a weeping cherry. Two wooden seats are placed near the pool. The sun shines gently into the courtyard and some birds chirp in the tree. The tall windows of the seminar rooms overlook the courtyard.
Cafe tables and chairs spill out through the open French windows of a warm, bright cafe. You can just see glimpses of people sitting inside, drinking coffee and chatting peacefully, while the strains of a live jazz quartet waft to you on the breeze.

Obvious exits: hall, Seminar2, Seminar1, seminar3, Seminar4, VC Project Room, and cafe

LOG <: cafe

LOG <: Orange Blossom Cafe
LOG <: As your eyes adjust to the lighting inside, you see old octagonal wooden tables and bentwood chairs on polished floorboards at one end, and at the other, a lounge area with deep leather couches grouped around low tables. A fireplace flickers with gently smouldering logs, and the scent of pine smoke mingles beautifully with the good smells of cooking and freshly brewed coffee. The room is divided into separate areas by large planters filled with red, pink and white flowering anthuriums, which makes each small group of chairs and tables feel cosy and intimate. A waiter greets you at the door and motions you to an empty table in a most hospitable manner.

You see red couch and green couch.
You see Tiger (Distracted) standing about.
You see menu board and clock.

Obvious exits: courtyard and gallery

LOG >: gallery

LOG <: gallery
LOG <: You are in a softly lit gallery with old polished floorboards and a high ceiling. Halogen downlights illuminate pedestals, which are at present empty. You can tell that there is going to be an exhibition soon, and wonder what sorts of things will be on show.

You see Teacher's Desk, Big Table, and Bulletin Board.
Obvious exits: cafe

Humour was an important factor in the development of connections between people and was important in helping to create an informal and relaxed environment in the early weeks of the course. Chester and Gwynne (1998) had previously reported on the high level of informality, even playfulness in this type of environment and believed it was important to develop the culture of the environment early. Once behaviour was modelled by the teaching and technical staff in the general MOO environment, it was reinforced in the three real-time, virtual conferences held in the MOO. This humour took many forms and included incidental jokes, gags and asides relevant to the context of the moment. In the following excerpt from the third conference, which was a reasonably heavy conversation about having relationships online, one of the students bounces a grape off another student’s head as a way of breaking the tension in the conversation. GeeGee, one of the teaching staff, took this in her stride and continued the discussion.

*EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE* says, "actually no...I have met a number of ppl from online, and with them it is all weird..like yeah...but with her...I could be myself.."

< connected: JW [Guest]. Total online: 11 >

*EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE* bounces a grape of WW's forehead

Tiger says "What do you think JW?"

WicketWarrick rubs head again..do'h! keeps falling for that one!! lol

JW [Guest] is going to try to join you.

JW [Guest] has arrived.:waves

GeeGee waves:

GeeGee cleans up the grape skins from the floor

*EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE* [to GeeGee]: how did trust develop? I don't know...like in any relationship I guess. The more time you spend with someone, the more you trust them, since they haven't screwed u over (Conference 3)

In other instances, people used a sort of slapstick comedy as a way of connecting with each other and pushing the boundaries of working out how to be in their new
environment. In the following example from the first conference, Flemmex the technical support person sets the tone for the conference. Students followed this modelling and would regularly pat, prod, poke and tickle each other, throw things around and generally start to test out the norms of their environment.

Tiger says, "And Surfgrrrl is one of our researchers"
Flemmex [to Surfgrrrl]: Your turn to bow.
Surfgrrrl bow
Flemmex digs Surfgrrrl in the ribs.
SKF claps
Tiger slaps Flemmex with a furry paw
Aerith smiles at Surfgrrrl :)
Tiger says, "Settle down Flemmex"
Flemmex says, "Ouch!"
Aerith says, ":)
Flemmex mutters and sulks.
Bunkka looks around eagerly
Surfgrrrl rubs Flemmex arm
SKF comforts Flemmex
SKF says, "=)"
Surfgrrrl says, "no cool with me"
Surfgrrrl says, "i might just say a few words and get it over with"
Flemmex winks but shuts up for a bit to let Tiger get on with it.
(Conference 1)

Just as in the real world, humour in the MOO extended beyond the real time interactions between people and included the use of the environment as well. This included playful actions in the form of jokes played on some of the teaching staff by groups of students. For example, after logging in one day, I found two students carrying a number of unusual objects that had previous been dispersed through the RMIT building in the MOO. When I asked what they were up to, one took me into Tiger’s office where I found a huge collection of objects from the MOO. These students were systematically going around the MOO, collecting things and filling up Tiger’s office as a joke. Tiger of course had no idea who had put all the stuff in her office until the face-to-face meeting in week twelve, when one of the students asked if
Tiger had been having trouble moving around her office lately! Naturally, we all had a good laugh and in that moment it was clear how the spatial and time properties of the MOO facilitated this type of human engagement.

In true ‘end user authoring’ mode, students also extended their presence in the MOO through the creation of objects that stayed in the MOO even when they had logged off. Often these objects were simply part of the development of a playful culture between people rather than for any practical purpose. An example of this playful culture was the development of an object (a Magical Bag of Grapes) by one of the more experienced students. The object (the bag of grapes) could be carried around by people and was generally left wherever the last person used it. Whoever had the bag could offer a fellow MOO inhabitant a grape. When the person typed the command ‘eat grape’ they would receive a randomly generated response. These responses included:

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LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a over-ripe brown grape from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a russet brown sultana grape from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a kiwifruit from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a leathery old prune from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a rather tired looking grape with pocket fluff attached to it from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a small sweet yellow grape from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a tightly packed bunch of black grapes from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a squishy grape from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a pair of leopard skin underpants from the bag and munches into it.
LOG <:Surfgrrrl takes a packet of ribbed condoms from the bag and munches into it.
```
The responses, particularly the more distasteful ones, generated laughter from those around and several games developed including an excellent version of Russian Roulette with Grapes. Objects such as this (and the myriad of other items people created to express who they were in the MOO) all served to facilitate discussion between inhabitants and to develop a sense of connection between people courtesy of the incidental sharing of information that occurred once people had started to spend more time with each other in the MOO. Once students became familiar with the environment, they related informally. Interestingly, some people developed very strong emotional connections with each other and discussed deeply personal issues. This included people sharing personal experiences of starting relationships online, having affairs and discussing current relationship difficulties.

The environment of the MOO was particularly useful in facilitating this type of personal sharing for a number of design characteristics:

- The segregated nature of the space - people in one room cannot hear what is going on in another room,
- The design qualities built into some objects used in the MOO - for example, some lounge chairs in the café were designed so that only those actually sitting on the chair could hear the conversations of others on the chair, and
- The real time or synchronous nature of the discussion - when two students bumped into each other in the MOO and had a conversation it existed only between them rather than being available for others to look through as with a bulletin board.
Space into Place

Using the previously discussed framework of Burbules (2000), the MOO space was transformed into a *place* because of various factors that operated in the space. These factors included the modelling of behaviour in the environment as an informal space, the capacity for MOO inhabitants to create, alter and transform a space, and the synchronous nature of interactions. Some of the students’ dorm rooms were good examples of the interplay of these factors. The more experienced students created elaborate rooms with detailed objects and outlooks. Some even created maze-like alternative exit paths from their rooms back into other spaces in the MOO. The following two dorm rooms illustrate their owner’s capacity and desire to design their own environment in a way that is both playful and that reflects something of their chosen identity. The first, Dorm14, is reminiscent of many teenagers’ rooms and feels very authentic. The second, BLUoRca’s Pool, illustrates a mix of extending the characters personality in the MOO via the design of the space, as well as integrating their identity and purpose for being on the course (note the titles of the books on the coffee table reflect some of the discussion topics in the course).

*LOG <: Dorm14*

*LOG <:* Deep violet walls as white windowills adorn the room. A large king size bed dominates the room, with a dresser at the opposite end, with a 72 flat screen HDTV with a full entertainment system. Above the bed head on the wall sits a Led Zeppelin Poster (the stairway to heaven one) and at the other side of the room a large Pearl Jam Poster, with Eddy standing in front of millions of ppl in concert. A pile of dirty clothes sits next to the bed, giving the room a lived in feel.

*LOG <: BLUoRca's Pool*

*LOG <:* you have entered a recently cleaned blue room with a very realistic underwater mural on one wall, oh wow! not a mural but a huge aquarium, in side a large shark stairs hungrily out. You see some Japanese calligraphy on the other walls and a autographed movie poster of Shrek. (To my friend BLUoRca love Shrek) There is a dark futon and a freshly wiped coffee table with some books scattered on it, (Gender Swapping for fun and Profit), (Come on guys and put your Stiletto’s and
mini’s’ on), *(The hairy legged feminazi**)* and *(Is moo'ing addictive and
dangerous to your health or marks?)*. In the corner of a room is a huge
recently opened box that says Acme gym on it and next to it is a large
chrome looking thing with weights and pulleys attached to it *(looks like
an instrument of torture)* There is a queen sized bed with a new zebra
stripped doona. And loud music blares from the radio with *(..a mars a day
helps you work rest and play..)* *(don't you hate it when those jingles get
stuck in your head)*

The development of these dorm rooms was an important experience for students in
turning the virtual space of the MOO into a place they inhabited for two reasons.
Firstly, the process of developing the rooms got them over the fear of creating things
in the MOO. The process of getting a dorm room required students to contact
Flemmex, the technical staff member, and request a key to their room. Flemmex
provided them with the key and some instructions on how to create things. The
development of the room itself by the student required no programming skills, as the
descriptions, like those above, are simply text descriptors assigned to an object label.
So the text above is simply assigned to object Dorm14, for example. Students quickly
lost any fear about the need for programming skills and realised they could edit and
re-edit their room descriptions as often as they liked. The second reason why the
development of these rooms was important is that students soon started to explore
each other’s rooms and talk about them. The more experienced students started to
create other objects and assisted fellow students to create objects for their rooms or to
carry around. Like the process of connecting with one another described by students
from the first case study, this process of object creation provided students with
opportunities to bump into people, talk about new things, and to work together or
provide each other with assistance. Once students started exploring other dorm rooms,
their reflections on the rooms started appearing in their journals. The following
journal entry from Fidelius was typical:
After wandering around for a few minutes I accidentally got to the north hall and I thought I should have a look. I visited KB's Pad and Bluorca's pool. KB's Pad was really messy, it looks like s/he's really into the computer thing. I loved Bluorca's pool. It helped me relaxed.

KB and Bluorca were both asleep, so I didn't stay for long. (Cs3_s j Fidelius)

Burbules' (2000) idea that place is a mixture of identity presence and familiarity could also be understood both in terms of peoples desire to spend time in an environment and their capacity to meld identity and environment. Some students really created a strong sense of synergy between their identities and their own private space in the MOO represented by their dorm room. Aurian’s room and her personal description are a good example of this:

\[ \text{LOG} <: \text{Aurian} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{-----} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{You see a tall figure shrouded in mist [entirely inappropriate for inside conditions], enclosed in a cloak of black. Escaping the cloak is piece of curled hair and you decide that this entity is female.} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{She is awake and looks alert.} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{Carrying:} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{Key, aurian's special pillow, pot of white anthuriums} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{Aurian's Lair} \\
\text{LOG} <: \text{You find yourself in Aurian's Lair, and wonder why you are here. Many souls gather here on a regular basis to exchange ideas and seek solace from the world's pressures. You find yourself staring at the mural on the wall, depicting a rather large dragon in full flight. Its piercing black eyes are almost hypnotic in their gaze and you pull yourself away. A corner-table is adorned in crystalline structures and an apparently ancient chalice sits on its outer, gathering dust. There is soft lighting which highlights the luxurious furniture, and a collection of jewel-encrusted staffs take pride of place on the wall parallel to your view.} \]

For Aurian, the MOO environment became so ubiquitous that she started to comment on feeling uncomfortable in any other online environment. In the following excerpt from her journal she is reflecting on the practice of taking very private conversations out of the MOO into a public chat facility (some of the students started to do this once they had developed very strong connections with others and wanted to talk privately
about their relationships both online and off). This practice started because some of
the users believed the MOO environment was permanently logged. This was not the
case – not, at least, by the staff or research team, though it may well have been by the
MOO provider.

Enlightened_One had difficulty in connecting to the same chat session as
WW and I, so he decided to leave for the night. WW and I remained in
conversation in the "unloggable environment" (as he described it as) for
roughly an hour. I felt strange interacting in a different environment - I
feel that it was because it was a different context, similar to the way you
feel when you see someone from Uni in a different setting, for example.
It's all about the environment that you're used to. (Cs3_s j Aurian)

The dorm rooms, corridors, cafes and courtyards all became spaces in which people
could play and bump into each other. The value of the capacity for informal meetings
within the MOO to facilitate engagement between students cannot be overstated. The
following journal entry from one of the students was typical both of how students just
choose to log on most nights and see who was around, but also of the way that they
just hung around together and chatted.

Log on time : 9.10pm
ppl online: Wicket Warrick (WW), Auerith and Jaro
WW, and Aureith were in the same room...was talking with them for
awhile...just stuffin round having fun...was good, like old friends...but not
quite.. learnt a bt about both, i.e, nationalities, ages.. but yeah...was all
good... however, they h
ad to leave around 9.40... I then went and talked
with Jaro...he was wokin on the work requirements from seminar 1
(Cs3_s j Enlightened_one)

This type of activity was evident when students were questioned about their login
practices, and it became apparent that the more experienced virtual environment users
worked hard at being present in the MOO in order to encourage others to log in.
Accessing a MOO requires particular software to be loaded onto the computer. Once
this software is launched it connects to the internet and presents the user with a login screen. The saMOOrai logon screen appears as follows:

```
|-----|\//|[]|[]|--|--|--|
|-----|\//|[]|[]|--|--|--|
\---------------------------------------

WELCOME to saMOOrai!       
Valid Commands: 
connect guest 
connect NAME PASSWORD 
@who

10 people are connected.

--->

The last line of this screen displays how many people are connected in the MOO at the time. When this screen was logged there were 10 people connected. In discussions with some students in the MOO it became clear that most students always checked first to see if anyone they knew was logged on before they proceeded to the next command, which is ‘connect NAME PASSWORD’. If they saw that someone was there they would often type the @who command to see who was logged in. When I asked them to explain this, the inexperienced students said that, unless they had a specific reason for logging in (to complete some set task, etc), it wasn’t worth logging in if no one was around. However, the common practice on the part of the more experienced students of logging on in the morning and staying logged on for long periods of time, meant that many fellow students logged in just to say ‘hi’ and have a chat. It would not be unusual to log in and find two or three students chatting about
the day’s events (social, political or course related) or exploring other spaces in the MOO such as dorm rooms or treasure hunts. Towards the end of semester, student life in the MOO included both formal learning activities and a tremendous amount of time just hanging around together or playing jokes on one another and the teaching staff. These practices all contributed to the environment becoming an inhabited place.

**Examples of community in action**

The numerous meetings between individuals, the playing of games and practical jokes, the partying and dancing at the end of the set conferences, and the sharing of personal stories all point to the kind of community that the students of ‘Personal Identity and Community in Cyberspace’ created. Examples of the connections students made with each other and the help they provided each other abounded in both their journals and in the logged sessions I witnessed in the MOO (see Appendix for an example of this type of incidental assistance provided to Foxy_dance from a logged session). The following examples illustrate how students both reflected on their connections with each other and how they worked together to achieve things.

So back to today's log in. Was good to see WW. Why? well, I've clicked with him I guess. He seems good to talk to. Why? Well, I don't know. Similar interests and just a vibe I guess. Isn't that weird? You can still get "vibes" on ppl, through a couple of thousand miles of cables and phone lines. That is perhaps the weirdest thing I felt when first moving onto the net. You still get the 'intuition' or 6th sense about ppl that you get in real life. And just like in real life, it is quite often wrong, but sometimes right. so yeah, back to WW. was good of him to help me out, and slowly but surely we're learning a lil more and more about each other. (Cs3_s j Enlightened_one)

Last night, I completed this week's assignment with Londongal (about online relationships). I couldn't believe that at 11:30pm, we were both still talking rapidly about our experiences, and responses to the task in general. This is what I feel true "community" amongst Internet users is all about. We also discussed the upcoming f2f meeting and our thoughts
regarding it - a little worry, hesitation, excitement, fear - all rolled into one neat little package.
It shall be interesting to see how it all unfolds... (Cs3_s j Aurian)

Even more than these reflections on community indicate, the MOO became the place students came to in the expectation of connecting up with others when they felt either under pressure or isolated. Examples of this community, or social learning support network in action, occurred several times in the MOO when students chose to log in when completing assignments. One of these incidents occurred towards the end of semester when students were reminded by one of the staff team of an assignment due the following day. Several students spontaneously chose to log into the MOO and spend several hours together, while completing their assignments at home. The assignment did not require collaboration between them to complete. Rather, they simply supported each other with humour and encouraged each other to complete the project. The feeling of connection was so strong within this group that they effectively chose to just ‘hang out together’ while they worked. Students often cited this night in their journals as an example of their community and the type of support they received from each other. When questioned about that specific night in the survey those students that had logged in that night discussed the reasons why:

I can't really remember if I logged in one day before the assignment is due (or that night). But i did log in every time an assignment is due. I expect to find more information or would just like to confirm with other people i might meet if the assignment is really due or is there a new information regarding the assessment etc. It's just to let myself feel more at ease, knowing that i have been doing the right thing. (Cs3_Aerith)

I logged in because I was finalising my journal and figured I would catch up with everyone else online. Also, the criteria for some of the work was pretty lose so i was looking to see if anyone had any tips for the assignment, ie i logged in to make sure i was doing the right thing and to collaborate on the assignment. (Cs3_Bunkka)
My main reason was that I had absolutely no idea of what was required of us to do in the assignment. ... All those online those nights were there to discuss ideas on what was required for the assignment. ... The MOO was a meeting point, and when I logged on, I remember just hoping to find other ppl in there. (Cs3_Enlitghned_onE)

I met many others in the same situation - that is, in the midst of their own procrastinations - tonight, and as a group we stressed, shared information and kept updates of our own findings and advancements with the Project. One person finished quickly before the 10pm deadline and the rest of us mentally pummeled that person. While the others slowly disbanded during the next 1.5 hours, three of us remained. One person gloated about their near-completion of the Project, while the other two of us exchanged worried virtual looks and contemplated what was next on the cards. (Cs3_s_j Aurian)

I logged in because i was always logged in. But it was also because there was a chance someone would be online that was in the same situation. We could then bounce ideas of each other to get a solution. It was also good to see that other people were in the same situation as you.. So i guess, mostly for support. (Cs3_Wicketwarrick)

Those that had not logged in that night often expressed the wish that they had:

I am not one of them, but if I’d known, I may have joined them to see what happened. (Cs3_JackyChan)

If I’d had known people were going to be there, i would have logged in just to have a chat about the assignment and what people were doing. (Cs3_londongal)

It is clear from these comments that the virtual space created in the MOO became the place for most students to head to in times of uncertainty and when in need of support. Those students that choose to hang out in the space clearly had an expectation that there would be others in the space, and that those in the space could provide them with assistance in clarifying what was required for the task or possibly provide assistance in completing it. Perhaps too they felt that it would be better to complete the task in the company of their mates because of the encouragement and support they expected to receive by merely being in the same space. These students had clearly transformed the MOO space into a place they felt both comfortable and at home in.
Implications of this case: the questions answered and new questions raised.

Of the three case studies, the students’ experience in the MOO provided strong evidence for the significance of community or social learning support networks for students studying online. In this case study I was able to directly observe connections forming between students, and the many ways in which students called upon each other for support and to see how this support practically assisted their learning.

This case study not only confirmed the significance and value of community for students studying courses online but also suggests that virtual online environments such as MOO’s (which provide students with a sense of place and the possibility of creating an extended social presence), create a unique virtual space which facilitates the development of social learning support networks or learning communities. The capacity for this type of virtual environment to create an online campus, in which students have the opportunity to engage with each other in the day-to-day business of being students, seems to provide a greater capacity for the development of ongoing student communities than single course modules or CMS social spaces. Of course, as discussed in the previous case studies, when students have the opportunity to physically meet up they use these opportunities to develop connections and then use electronic communication mediums to maintain their relationships. However, for students who are studying completely online, the virtual environment they encounter provides the only space in which they can meet and develop a sense of connection with each other. For the most part these environments, usually through CMS, focus on providing the equivalent of the classroom in an electronic form. This case study highlights the value of broadening our understanding of what constitutes an online course (beyond providing an electronic classroom), to providing a more holistic
electronic environment. This environment should have the capacity for students to interact both in their day-to-day social connections and through their formal learning processes.
Concluding Discussion: Common Themes and Implications

Many Australian universities grapple with both interpreting and responding to student engagement data (Coates 2006) and working through the effective use of online learning environments. Creating learning communities or a sense of belonging for students has emerged in the Australian higher education literature as a key goal for those interested in improving the student experience (Coates 2005; McInnis et al 2000). At the same time, many universities are coming to terms with the failure of their investments in eLearning to generate the new revenue streams forecast in the late 1990s, (Zemsky and Massy 2004; Reynoldson and Vibert 2005) and are focusing on developing sustainable eLearning policies that try to reconcile the demands of professional development for staff with increasing student demands for courses that are flexibly delivered (Minshull 2004). In writing this thesis I had two aims. Firstly, I wanted to understand the significance of community for students studying online. Secondly, I wanted to understand what role the constructed online environment played in the development of community for students.

Although the case studies are drawn from early models of eLearning environments, my research is significant because it provides a new way of thinking about ‘community’ for students by showing the importance of community and how it works in both on-campus and online learning environments. But more importantly, it provides a new way of thinking about community that shifts our understanding away from a nebulous, ill-defined idea - to a practical, student-centred idea of community defined as Social Learning Support Networks (SLSN). In this thesis I have argued that
the constructed online environment can facilitate the development of SLSN’s for courses delivered fully online if it provides students with what Burbules (2000) calls, a place to inhabit. While the evidence for this second finding came from students who were effectively distance learners, it is likely that the elements of the online environment that supported their development of SLSN’s are also relevant for the online environment we provide for on-campus students. In this chapter I draw together the common themes from the three cases and detail the significance of this research for future developments of eLearning in higher education by providing five significant challenges to the current design of Course Management Systems (CMS).

There were four major themes to emerge from the three cases and each influenced a student’s capacity or willingness to develop community. They were:

- Community - in the form of SLSN’s, was identified as a critical factor in supporting student’s learning in each case.
- Work-life-study balance – Students choosing to study online usually have significant demands outside of their study including family, work and social commitments. The development of SLSN’s had to be integrated into their life as a student.
- Modelling behaviour – Understanding how to be online for students was a result of their interactions with others and the environment. University staff played a key role in establishing the culture of how to be online.
- Physical/virtual environment – turning space into place. The physical and virtual environments played a significant role in providing students with the opportunity to connect with each other and develop SLSN’s.
In exploring the significance of community for students, these factors emerged as core to understanding the value of community from a student’s perspective. My research points to the value of stepping outside the electronic classroom and recognising that for many students, developing support networks is as much about what happens between them as it is about what the teacher either does or designs into the electronic classroom.

**Social Learning Support Networks**

- *Arranged marriages vs. having mates: being pushed rather than pulled into connecting with each other.*

I started this thesis by exploring definitions of community and trying to get to the heart of why the concept of ‘community’ has been so important in the online learning literature. Interestingly, through the process of this research I have come to understand something fundamentally problematic about the way we theorise ‘community’, and therefore how we try to operationalise it. For the most part in the literature and in many student engagement policy documents (see The University of Melbourne Teaching and Learning Plan 2006), the term ‘community’ is used in a very ‘objective’ way. It is generally referring to something we should create for the students or that the students should have or be engaged in – because we know it will be good for them! In the interviews for the first case, students often responded rather badly to the idea that they needed to be part of a community. One student looked at me rather quizzically when I asked him if he felt part of a community at university. He paused and tentatively responded ‘You mean like, have I got any friends!’ (CS1). I suspect community has become something we either do to people or it is represented as some utopian dream. This binary either results in people wanting to avoid it or else
never feeling like they are quite part of it. It is worth exploring this binary because it shapes student’s notions of what it means to be part of a community.

When we are *doing* community to people it is often represented by a deficit model, as if the people we want to be part of community suffer a lack of capacity (Frank and Smith 2006), i.e. there is a problem, and a bit of *community* will fix it! Typical scenarios go something like this. It is said that there has been a ‘break down’ in *community* when young people in an area are rioting; community development workers are employed to improve ‘troubled’ housing estates, or people ‘with problems’ (i.e. like drug users, the mentally ill or young people at risk of suicide) require support. In this deficit model, being someone who ‘needs’ community equals being someone who has a problem or worse, is lonely! A student from the second case, reflecting on the Virtual Social Space, comments as if he is an outsider on a space he desperately does not want to be associated with:

*The VSS as a social space is akin to sitting alone in a bar with no atmosphere drinking diet Tango and, just before you leave, jot a cryptic message to say that you have been there on a post it note and stick it on the fruit machine. (a bit sad really) (06_3)*

There is nothing in his reflections that might hold the slightest hope that he could get something positive out of such a space. Sticking the post-it note on the fruit machine is the desperate act of a lonely person – but it is not what he did or wanted to do. Everything about his reflection points to a resistance about the very idea of the space. Conrad (2002, p. 4) suggests the desire to engage students in learning communities can result in teachers designing activities where ‘learners are pushed, not pulled, into a community framework, somewhat like an arranged marriage’ and that doing this often results in ‘conscious restraint on the parts of learners in contributing to
community’. Students from all three cases confirmed Conrad’s point, with only two students from the first case mentioning that one of the ways they made connections with fellow students was through collaborative activities in an on-campus class. I am sure, that at some level this is not an accurate reflection, and that all the students, at some point, developed connections with another student via their engagement in class. The interesting thing however is that the students didn’t own those connections as their own. The connections they owned were those they made in spaces outside of the classroom. Importantly, for many students with quite established networks, they still didn’t identify as part of a community when the term was used without further explanation or clarification.

I suspect this was possibly because when students hear the term community they overlay a concept of community that represents some long-past utopian dream that has been important to the history of the social sciences (Toennies 1963). This dream is a representation of community that is outside of most peoples lived experience (Bauman 2001). Contemporary students are all too familiar with idealised stories of political campus life in the 1960s and 1970s – told by academics in their fifties who drift nostalgically back to the days of student activism, free love, drug use, no HECS 7 and seemingly no consequences for not passing your exams! It is unclear if this was ever an accurate representation of the student community life. Utopian ideals rarely are accurate. There is little wonder that students today do not identify their experience of university life as ‘feeling part of a community’ if this is the kind of image of community that they think of. Several students from across the three cases, at some point in our preliminary discussions regarding participating in this research, talked

7 Australian university education fees were abolished in 1973. The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was introduced in Australian universities in 1989. It effectively requires students to make a significant contribution to the cost of their education via a deferred payment system.
about their experience of university life as not being as good as X – ‘X’ being what I call the X factor. For one student the X factor was her husband’s university experience 20 years ago, for another it was a mate at a sandstone university. For another it was a friend studying in the U.S. and for another it was a student in the same school but in a different program. It may well be that these friends and relatives did have a better experience of university community life, but it is also possible, as Bauman (2001) argues, that the ideal of community is seemingly never within our grasp. Student’s resistance to identifying with the term community had a profound effect on my thesis. During the initial call for participants for the first case, a number of students commented that when they heard that the research was about community, they didn’t respond because they felt they didn’t know anything about community. It was from this point on I started to talk about the research in terms of understanding the connections students made with each other.

When community was put in these more subjective, practical and concrete terms it became a question. That question pointed to issues like – what support do I get from my connections with fellow students, or what support do I give to someone I study with. Students had no problem identifying the value this type of connection provided for their studies and why they would attempt, where possible, to create these connections. As I have detailed in the previous three chapters, in each case students identified an understanding of how a social network of associations with peers might be of practical benefit. They provided their own examples of these types of relationships working within their lives. They could spell out how these relationships developed and existed. They could also detail how these relationships supported their learning, and they could say how these relationships were active inside and outside of
the classroom. Students didn’t always talk about these connections in terms of strong friendships. For some they were more like acquaintanceships that could be reliably called upon for assistance. These relationships represented an individual student’s network of support that existed outside of the constructed learning space and often extended beyond the duration of a single course. I have defined these as Social Learning Support Networks (SLSN) partially to distinguish them from both the intensity of a friendship, with its sense of longevity and intimacy, as well as from the less reliable concept of an acquaintance, with its sense of transience and lack of obligation to assist another. The term Social denotes these relationships as connections that exist outside of the designed learning space but are also social in that they are defined by people coming together (as opposed to learning support resources students might find on a university web site for example). And importantly, SLSN includes the term Learning because this dimension was critical for students. Students valued SLSN’s and put energy into creating and maintaining connections with others over time because they understood the importance of these connections during times of study stress, and importantly, that these personal networks actually assisted them in achieving their learning objectives. This was important for undergraduate students, but postgraduate students especially made the point that the choice to study was a choice to redirect resources - time, money and personal energy, from some other aspect of their lives.
Work-life-study balance

- I work hard and late, I have studies to do and somewhere fit in a social life. This schedule does not leave time to engage in VSS – ing (Sheffield student 03_1)

Students participating in this research clearly identified that juggling their study with other parts of their lives was stressful and affected the way they developed connections with each other. My research makes it clear how study is just one part of a multifaceted identity for students. While the depth of this feeling was very strong for the postgraduate students from Sheffield, the undergraduate students from the first case also confirmed that most students who choose to study online, do so in order to be able to fit their studies in with other parts of their life. Palloff and Pratt (2003, p.113) characterise the virtual student as someone who ‘tends to be older, working, and involved with family activities and the community’ adding that ‘The convenience factor is what draws these students to the online environment, because it allows them the time for other equally important aspects of their lives’. The students in this research certainly reflected Palloff and Pratt’s profile of an online student. For the students in the first two cases, nothing in their constructed online environment facilitated their engagement with one another in the same way as the physical campus did for on-campus students, or the way the MOO did for students in the third case.

In the third case I didn’t explicitly set out to explore this work/life/study balance. However, students often commented in their daily interactions in the MOO on the pressures of fitting everything in. Interestingly, some students from the third case were able to integrate the time they spent in the MOO with their work life. Some worked in jobs that allowed them to have the MOO running in a background window on their computer. They organised for a pop-up message to hit their screen if someone
else logged into the MOO and would click over to the MOO window and say ‘hello’ to whoever had logged in. Spender (1995) and Turkle (1997) have pointed to multitasking as an emerging capability linked to the use of technology like window-based computers, both in the practice of having multiple applications open on a computer as well as in terms of people’s capacity to effectively be engaged in a number of different tasks at one time. This, in effect, allowed them to be in two places at once. These students tended to be the more active participants in the MOO in general but their behaviour also had the unintended consequences of making them available to offer support to fellow students in a ‘just in time’ manner. In the MOO, the timeliness of this support facilitated the development of SLSN’s and balanced out the study pressures associated with managing work, home life and study.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, students in the MOO started to establish patterns of online behaviour that colleagues could rely on for support when they needed it. These patterns included various practices: some students usually logged into the MOO and hung around the night before an assignment was due; certain students logged on at about 8pm most nights; and one or two students could usually be found in the MOO during the day. These patterns of behaviour and the synchronous nature of the MOO supported students in integrating their study period with other aspects of their lives in two ways. Firstly, the quality of the SLSN’s they had developed with each other and the culture of the online environment meant they could confidently seek support from each other. Secondly, the knowledge of their colleague’s availability in the MOO allowed students to seek support at common times of study stress. The students in the MOO developed SLSN’s that were
integrated into their life as a student but existed outside of the defined learning activities in their course.

The students from the first two case studies believed these connections were important but said they did not have either the time or the desire for contributing to a contrived online community. While wanting and valuing the connections between students that resulted in the development of learning support networks, the capacity to build these connections needed to be integrated into their learning processes and/or the learning environment, and modelled by those familiar with the space. In effect, as the literature on community development has suggested (Campfens 1997; Ife 1995), someone needed to take a leadership role in the online environment and model the type of behaviour that could then set the groundwork for students to develop SLSN’s.

**Modelling Behaviour**

It was significant that the students from the RMIT Social Science program talked about not knowing how to *be* in the online environment. Knowing how to *be* online is a mixture of both being familiar with the environment, and feeling a sense of presence from others in the space. For many students in this first case, there was uncertainty at a number of levels. They were uncertain about how formal they should be. There was a need for them to both familiarise themselves with the online medium, while at the same time, to understand the permanence of text in online spaces like discussion boards. They looked for clues from other students and from the teaching staff about how much of their personal life they should bring into the online environment, and how ‘academic’ they should be in their contributions. In effect, the entire online
environment represented an online classroom space in which their every comment remained permanently on show (for the life of the course). Students from all three cases talked about feeling nervous when going online to make contributions and waiting for others to have their say first, so they could follow their lead. This level of anxiety certainly had an effect on student’s willingness to engage online.

However, there was some evidence from the students in the RMIT social science program that teaching staff could reduce some of this anxiety by modelling the type of behaviour expected in the environment. A tutor from one version of the course started to model a very relaxed style of engagement with students. He did this by commenting in the discussion forums about his personal life and bringing his offline experiences into the discussions. Some of his students said this helped by reducing their sense of anxiety about contributing to the discussions and it provides evidence confirming the importance of teaching staff modelling the type of interactions and engagement they wanted from their students (Salmon 2001). Most of these students had very little experience in the online world and for many there was no sense of how to be. They had not developed an online voice or sense of identity.

The design of the Virtual Social Space that the students in the Sheffield University course encountered tried to reduce their anxiety by having the social environment completely separate from the prescribed learning environment. The VSS was built in a separate online environment altogether. The project was designed to allow students to own this space through their management of it. However, knowing how to be and achieving a sense of social presence, a sense that the space was a lived place - was not modelled by anyone. Not only was this an unfamiliar environment for students, but
also the activity in the space was not being driven or modelled by anyone. There was not even that element of needing to engage with teaching staff as part of some learning activity (found in many online courses) because teaching staff were not in the space, and the space was not integrated into their learning environment. The experiences of students from the first and second case studies confirms Salmon’s (2001, pp. 28 - 30) arguments for the modelling of behaviour by teaching staff in what she defines as the ‘online socialization’ stage of an online course. Salmon (2001, p. 29) argues ‘When participants feel “at home” with the online culture, and reasonably comfortable with the technology, they move on to contributing.’ There was little evidence in either the first or second case study of the online environment supporting students to feel ‘at home’ and, as such, there was little online interaction between students that could be defined as social.

This was in contrast with the environment created within the MOO where students learnt how to be via their initial interactions with teaching and technical staff, and then through their daily interactions with each other. They developed the confidence and capacity to develop an online voice and a sense of identity. This environment brought together the elements lacking in the other two cases. Namely, the teaching and technical staff modelled the type of behaviour that encouraged casual, friendly, informal contact, and students inhabited the space in a way that ensured that it became a lived space, a place where a student knew they could go to catch up with another student.

This type of casual, just-in-time type of engagement was important in the development of SLSN’s because it offered students a place they could drop into
without prejudice. By this I mean that in logging into the MOO they were not publicly committed in their intent. This is similar to when a student comes onto campus. They may be intending to go to the library, they might be going to class, they might be meeting up with friends, they might be attending a counselling service or they might not have a clear intent – they are just coming onto campus as part of their life as a student. In a sense, the MOO provided a similar environment to this. Students could check who was logged on before logging in and some just logged on and went straight to one of the study orientated spaces (galleries or seminar rooms) to complete a task. Others just hung out in their dorm rooms while others wandered around the MOO space, exploring student’s contributions to the notice boards or heading off on a virtual train to explore the MOO’s virtual representation of Tokyo. Regardless, a MOO etiquette was established that ensured students always greeted each other on entry to the MOO. Teaching and technical staff spent a number of hours each day during the first two weeks of semester in the MOO, and students quickly recognised they could call on staff for assistance with technical issues and questions related to the course. Students developed clear communication processes that allowed them to ask for help in a casual way because of the behavioural etiquette established in the first few weeks. Evidence of the effectiveness of this modelled behaviour started to appear early in the course when some students started to organise to meet at arranged times so they could help each other with technical aspects of operating in the MOO. The MOO was both a familiar and foreign environment for most students. Although spaces had familiar labels, students had to gain technical skills as well as work through their relationships with each other to complete content related tasks. The modelling of behaviour initially by teaching and technical staff, and later between the students, not only reinforced a constructivist approach, it created the opportunity for
informal ‘chat’ which became one of the factors for people ‘getting to know each other’ and the development of SLSN’s. The environment supported them in this because of the patterns of engagement they had developed with each other.

**Physical/virtual environments – purposefully turning space into place.**

The most significant theme to emerge from this research is the relationship between the environment and the development of SLSN’s. While the literature reviewed for this research related the development of community for students with the learning activities designed by teaching staff, there was no evidence in the literature of the need to understand the relationship between student’s engagement with each other outside of the formal learning activities and the vital role the environment played in supporting the development of these relationships. This requires a more holistic understanding of the *environment* to include not just the activities designed in classrooms, nor just the constructed physical or virtual environment students study in, but to understand how students move and engage with each other in those areas not defined as classrooms.

For all three cases, students illustrated the significance of SLSN’s and the effect the environment they encountered had on them developing connections with each other. Although students from the first case did not engage socially with each other online, they clearly illustrated how the physical campus environment supported the incidental contact between them that provided the foundations for the development of their SLSN’s. Students from the second case went to great effort to ensure they spent social time with most of their colleagues around the on-campus workshop days, specifically
because they understood the value of developing supportive relationships with others; and yet they didn’t use the virtual space provided for the reasons outlined in chapter 4. However, the most compelling evidence for the importance of the relationship between the constructed online environment and the development of SLSN’s comes from the third case.

As I discussed in chapter 5, the MOO environment provided students who had no other opportunity to engage with each other, with the capacity to develop SLSN’s. This is because the constructed environment of the MOO contained the key elements students required to transform an online space into a lived place - a place they could inhabit by creating things, engage in defined learning activities, play in, and importantly, a place students went to for support in times of study stress.

The idea that the design of the online environment can facilitate the development of community is certainly not new, nor is the idea that people will strive to create support networks using whatever means at their disposal. As long ago as 1993, Rheingold argued this in his seminal book *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* - "My direct observation of online behaviour around the world over the last ten years have led me to conclude that whenever computer mediated communication technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as micro-organisms inevitably create colonies" (Rheingold 1993, p. 6). However, this thesis provides evidence to support the work of those interested in the development of online communities in an educational context and who recognise that the design of the online environment has a relationship to the sustainability of the connections students make with each other. Unlike most CMS-
based online learning environments, the MOO provided the type of environment that supported students’ engagement with each other for a few simple reasons. As well as providing an environment that contained the defined learning activities and specified learning spaces (classrooms), it also provided a campus-like environment based on concepts that were familiar to students. This environment provided the capacity for synchronous contact that was not monitored (and therefore represented private space) and the students had the capacity to create objects that enabled them to extend a sense of social presence and their own personality into the MOO. These factors, together with the modelling of a ‘relaxed and supportive’ behavioural etiquette or culture in the MOO by teaching and technical staff, ensured students made sustainable connections with each other that supported their learning.

The behaviour of the students in the MOO confirms the work of Prasolova-Forland and Divitini (2002). They have argued for the use of appropriate spatial metaphors to inform the design of online learning environments. Their work recognises the vital interplay of the spatial arrangements and incidental contact in the development of connections for learners in a way that was confirmed by the RMIT social science students when they talked about ‘bumping’ into each other, and by the behaviour of students I observed in the MOO.

Communication plays a key role in keeping a community alive. Particularly important is the communication that is triggered by casual encounters. This communication is reported to be essential for knowledge sharing and strengthening the ties among community members. The communication is dependent on spatial arrangements, e.g. proximity of desks in a laboratory and attendance in the same classroom. A student that is not physically present in
the “territory” of the community cannot take part in this communication.

(Prasolova-Forland and Divitini 2002, pp. 259 - 260)

Importantly, Prasolova-Forland and Divitini discuss the implications of using different metaphors in the design and labelling of online environments. They make the distinction between labels that describe real spaces verses those that describe the intended purpose of the space. Key to their argument is the idea that the use of appropriate design metaphors, such as buildings and campuses, creates online environments that are familiar to students. ‘The analogy with the physical campus allows [sic] creating a virtual environment that is familiar to users and where they can easily move to meet people, access learning materials, and retrieve information.’ (Prasolova-Forland and Divitini 2002, pp. 260 - 261). The authors suggest this is in contrast to metaphors that describe the intended purpose of the space (i.e. a discussion board in a Blackboard or WebCT unit) which they suggest focuses ‘on the information itself, not the person behind it’, arguing that in these environments there is a need ‘to strengthen the social aspect in such a system.’ (Prasolova-Forland and Divitini 2002, p. 262). Focusing on the person behind the information exchange requires an engagement with the environment using a more holistic understanding of the whole online space. It requires a shift in focus, moving beyond the electronic ‘classroom’ to effectively include a student-centred view of a student’s online life.

Focusing on a student feeling comfortable in a learning environment requires them to know how to be in that environment. This is reflected in Wilson’s (1995) work when he talks about the outcome of learning not as ‘knowing that, know how’ or knowing ‘names for knowledge’ but rather as feeling like we know our way around in a subject. In arguing for the use of the term learning environment, Wilson (1995) argues
that the use of the metaphor \textit{classroom} invariably starts the conversation from a teacher-led, teacher-centred perspective, as opposed to a \textit{learning environment} that situates the learner and their experiences in the foreground. The MOO represented starting from this \textit{learning environment} perspective. It required all involved to negotiate their relationship with both the constructed online environment and each other. In negotiating this relationship by authoring their own identity and social presence, the MOO, as an environment conformed to both Burbules’ (2000) understanding of the conditions that mediate the existence of community and Goodyear’s (2002) understanding of the learner’s need to configure their own ‘learnplaces’. In both these formulations, the learner has licence to act and the capacity to author their own space. The construction of the MOO represented this fluidity and the relationship between elements of the online environment and people’s behaviour. Students knew how to \textit{be}, and how to use of the environment to develop SLSN’s because the environment felt familiar. They could create things and shape their own environment, while others were present in the MOO in ways that facilitated greater engagement.

\textit{Implications from this project for future research and the development of eLearning environments.}

Having opened the literature review for this project with a quote from Brown and Johnson-Shull on the failure of academic research to inform practice, it is a little daunting to speculate on the place of a piece of research such as this – one that uses the experiences of students to explore the three distinct fields of ‘online learning’, ‘community’ and ‘learning environment design’ – and to argue for its capacity to inform a new approach to the development of online learning environments. And yet
that is precisely the implications of this research. It provides a grounded understanding of the significance of community in the form of SLSN’s for student learning, and demonstrates that the design of the online learning environment plays a significant role in providing students with an opportunity to build connections and relationships with each other.

Is it right to suggest that all future online learning environments should look something like the MOO used in the third case? The answer to this is simply, no. The development of online learning environments and the use of the internet in higher education is a rapidly evolving field - as is the technical capability of students - with teaching staff in most fields often lagging somewhat behind, but improving nevertheless. Certainly, we have some examples of graphics-based virtual online educational spaces (such as tappedin.org for K-12 teacher’s professional development and projects in SecondLife such as the SEAL Project supported by MediaZoo). Although I shall discuss the use of SecondLife in more detail later, it is fair to say, these virtual worlds haven’t really influenced CMS design to date. It is reasonable to suggest that this is because the resource issues these environments create, both in terms of the need for broadband internet access for students, and the technical capacities of teaching staff required to build learning environments in them is still too great. The MOO was a text-based environment and was very accessible using a dial-up connection and was easy to develop for staff. Further research will be required to understand the changing capacity of the environment and the capacities of those who learn and teach in them. However, a project such as this, that has focused on the human elements of relationship building, our sense of place, and our capacity to know how to be in an environment, has a great deal to offer the field of eLearning. The
contributions from the students in these three case studies to our understanding of ‘community’ certainly has much to contribute to those engaged in designing tomorrow’s eLearning environments. In particular, for the next generation of course management systems, which are the mainstay of most university’s commitment to online learning.

The individual practice of teachers will always shape the student’s learning experience, however, teachers will always be working within the constraints of the enterprise-wide learning environments provided in both the on-campus and online worlds. Just as on-campus teaching staff will attempt to move the desks in a room to reshape the learning activity into a more collaborative approach, or struggle to work interactively in large lecture theatres, the vast majority of teaching staff who venture into the online environment use the Course Management System provided by their institution. In a sense, the findings from this research are a challenge to the designers of CMS to break out of the old paradigm of providing something like separate demountable, portable, electronic classrooms - into creating rich online learning environments. These rich online learning environments will not only be rich in the various teaching tools we as educators like to deploy, but will also be rich in the sense that they take into account the way in which students engage with each other outside the classroom (as much as how we think they should engage inside the classroom!).

The following five principles represent challenges from this research for future developers of enterprise-wide online learning environments. These principles bring together the various findings from this research and translate them into core design elements critical for improving the development of SLSN’s:
• *Getting together outside the electronic classroom.* Tinto’s (2000) research into the benefits of on-campus learning communities found, amongst other things, that members of learning communities developed their own self-supporting groups, they spent more time together outside of the classroom, and did so in ways students reported as supportive. The students’ experiences from this research certainly support Tinto’s work, but more importantly, their behavior in the MOO is a challenge to CMS designers to think outside of the classroom and provide students with space to inhabit and make their own.

• *Learning environments need to be integrated into the social environment, not the other way round.* To date the development of online learning environments has been split between CMS and content. Software vendors have, primarily, focused on the development of CMS. These systems are really student management systems that provide an attractive whole-of-institution solution for the university because of their scalability and risk management over issues such as copyright. Educators have focused on the content and learning activities development suitable for operating within the CMS, including the use of socializing discussion boards. Effectively, the CMS has shaped the pedagogical approach used by most educators. However, students from these case studies owned and valued the SLSN’s they developed outside of the formal learning environment. For students in the MOO and for those in on-campus courses, the learning environment is situated *within* the broader social environment they encountered.
• **Performance anxiety in a text based classroom: students need a space to bounce ideas off each other in their own time.** The provision of ‘classroom’ only type online spaces limits the opportunities for student to engage with each other and heightens the performance anxiety associated with a written medium. The MOO case study clearly demonstrated that students would take their learning processes outside of the ‘classrooms’ provided and into the halls, dorms and cafes of their virtual university campus or other online sites. These interactions outside the formal learning environment provided them with a safe space to explore their learning with peers.

• **Student identity and social presence: deciding what color shirt to wear that day!** The provision of social spaces with the capacity for extended social presence by a student has both a sense of time and location. The capacity to author their identity and leave their mark on a virtual space transforms it into a *place* that students choose to inhabit.

• **Just bumping into each other.** Lastly, the provision of real time (synchronous) opportunities for contact supported the incidental sharing of information between students, which proved to be important in the development of trust relationships and the building of Social Learning Support Networks.

Although the ideas of integrating working environments into social spaces and the importance of incidental or what the teleworking field termed ‘chance encounters’ are
represented in other fields\(^8\), these five design principles provide a radical departure from the dominant CMS architecture found in most universities. It requires us to reassess both how students use online environments and how we conceptualise the boundaries of the online environments we provide for students. The understanding of human interaction and the development of SLSN’s from this research contributes to four emergent areas of research and thinking on eLearning, namely: understanding the learning principles designed in successful online computer games; the growth of identity based online communities related to university student life; the development of student portals by many universities; and the use of virtual environments (such as SecondLife) in higher education. While there are certainly commercial drivers involved with some of these projects (facebook.com for example), arguably their success or failure relates to their capacity to start from a student-centred approach and to understand what happens for students as they engage with the online environment.

It is clear that the success of online gaming environments in teaching complex concepts and context related knowledge to players is of interest to the academic community. Authors such as James Gee have started to explore these issues in publications such as *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy* (2004). At the same time, authors such as Chen (2006) and others have started to explore the value of immersive and non-immersive virtual reality learning environments. Others are exploring Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) to understand the education and engagement principles within them (Young et al 2006). Certainly, the remarkable growth of Facebook.com (a website designed for university students to create their own profile) relies on students wanting to make

connections with each other and creating a web presence for themselves. In April 2006, Facebook.com reportedly had over seven million users and was worth more than $1.30 Billion US (Kushner 2006). By 2007 the site had grown exponentially, with a reported seventeen million users (Robbins 2007a). The acceptance by students of sites like Facebook, has caused some authors to challenge educators to abandon their university CMS altogether and use social networking sites (such as Facebook) to deliver their courses:

  Getting tired of the Learning Management System on your campus? Ever look to see how infrequently your students actually log in to see their assignments etc? Let me tell you, it’s pretty darn infrequently. So why not create a course site on a social network where they already live? (Robbins 2007b, para. 1)

Trying to understand where students of the future will ‘live’ online will be significant in the medium-to-long term as we move towards a more integrated idea of online life. However, the more short-term areas of interest, likely to directly effect the development of CMS, is the work being done by many universities in developing student portals, and the use of online environments such as SecondLife by more and more educators.

Many Australian universities have developed student portals in an attempt to provide ‘more complete, holistic online environments for students and staff by converging a number of technologies’ (Kennedy et al 2002, p. 24). While there has been the development of portals designed to improve student literacy skills (Hiscock and Marriott 2003), and other portals designed to improve critical aspects of the student’s experience, such as transition (Nelson et al 2005), more universities are now looking towards portals as a way of providing a seamless administrative, communication and
learning environment for students. (For examples in the Australian context see: Monash University - my.monash; Southern Cross University – MySCU; University of Canberra - OSIS: The Online Student Information System; University of Southern Queensland – USQConnect; University of Sydney – MyUni; The University of Queensland - my.UQ; University of Wollongong – SOLS; Curtin University of Technology – OASIS.) While there is evidence of extensive use of these facilities with sites like My.monash reporting 95% of students accessing the portal on a weekly basis (Kennedy et al 2002), there is little evidence appearing in the literature on the capacity of these environments to support the development of community for students in the form of SLSN’s. This may be because this type of research is underway but just not reported yet or, more worryingly, that there are assumptions that the high usage of these environments will automatically translate to students developing communities. While most Australian universities work on their student portals, many educators, particularly in the US, Europe and UK are starting to explore environments such as SecondLife.

SecondLife (SL) developed in 2003, by the Linden Corporation, is evolving into a rich virtual world capable of sustaining its own economy and developing its own culture. The use of SL for education has been supported by the Linden Corporation but has, until recently, been characterised mainly by individual academics venturing into the environment to teach individual courses (Kirriemuir 2007). However 2006/2007 has seen many higher education institutions commit resources into SL, develop their own islands, replicate their campuses and run courses ‘in-world’\textsuperscript{9}. These institutions have included prestigious universities such as Harvard University, New

\textsuperscript{9} ‘In-world’ is the term used to describe being logged in to a virtual world
York University, Stanford University (SimTeach 2007) and Oxford University (Kirriemuir 2007). The SL environment has similar characteristics to that of the MOO used in this research and, as such, it should provide students with similar opportunities to develop SLSN’s. There is a significant amount of research occurring in SL with a view to understanding how the environment might be used in higher education. Kirriemuir (2007, pp. 8-13) details several projects including: work by Krotoski exploring social network; work by Childs on the learners’ experience; work from the University of Portsmouth examining the strengths and weaknesses of virtual environments; and work by Imperial College London comparing two groups of students’ experiences – one completing a module SL and the other in WebCT.

Certainly many of the institutions building campuses within SL are including the type of social spaces in which students are likely to ‘bump’ into each other, and there is some evidence of ‘students commenting on the confidence given them by the environment and how this has helped them as learners’ (Kirriemuir, 2007, p. 22). However, there is no evidence of any universities choosing to move from their CMS fully into SL. This is not unreasonable given that the high-level computer graphics and bandwidth requirements for SL will continue to pose a barrier for many universities outside of the U.S., both for content development and student access. While academic staff can learn the SL programming language and create the learning environments relevant to their course, this requires a significant commitment of the part of the academic and is likely to remain another barrier to the broad adoption of this environment without significant institutional support.
In a sense this is the ‘tough’ question for institutions. Build their own integrated online environment including administrative function, learning spaces (both virtual-immersive and CMS like), library resources and social environments - providing them with clear risk management of issues such as copyright and branding. Or choose a third-party environment, not just a third-party application such as BlackBoard run on their own servers, but a whole environment – which will inextricably link their online presence with the branding of the third-party provider and provide all the future-proofing issues universities have face when deciding to move from one CMS to another. While the findings from this research do not provide any clear direction on this question, the five design principles outlined will play an important part in the success of any future online learning environment’s capacity to foster a sense of social connection for students.

Conclusion

*I pay the schoolmaster, but ‘tis the schoolboys that educate my son.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

While there is still significant debate about the quality of online learning in universities, it is clear that eLearning and the use of the online environment to support students in their studies will continue to be a dominant factor in university life. While the last decade has seen the almost universal adoption of Course Management Systems by universities, the decades to come are likely to see new developments in online learning environments that will attempt to integrate the student’s zeal for products like Facebook, with the richness of virtual environments such as SecondLife,
while still proving the security and risk management associated with CMS. The findings from this research will contribute to this new environment.

This qualitative research project used three case studies to explore tertiary students’ thoughts and expectations about community in the online environment. Evidence from the first case study suggested there was a need to explore the relationship between the constructed online learning environment and the development of learning communities or what I have termed Social Learning Support Networks. To explore this issue further, the project was expanded and subsequent cases were chosen that included fundamentally different types of online learning environments.

This project had two significant results. Firstly, students not only confirmed popular educational theories on the value of learning communities, but also described how this form of social connection might practically benefit their learning. Secondly, the project found that certain forms of synchronous online environments provided enhanced opportunities for students to form social connections that supported their learning.

These results have provided new evidence of the benefit of community for students studying online and have been translated into five key design principles. I have argued that future online learning environments should be shaped by these five key design principles to foster a greater sense of social connection between students and to aid in the development of Social Learning Support Networks. Emerson understood the overriding power and currency of the connections students make with each other and the subsequent shaping of their learning experiences. I think it is fair to say, that over
a hundred years later, we are still working through how we translate the power of what ‘schoolboys’ (and schoolgirls) have relied on for centuries - *having a mate to call on!* - into a vibrant, sustainable university eLearning environment. This research contributes to that goal.
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First Case Study Research Information
Research Project About Your Experiences of SP120 Online

What’s it all about?
You are invited to take part in a Masters Level Research project exploring your experiences of SP120 Online. This project will seek to further our understanding of how students are experiencing Online delivery of courses. Your thoughts and reflections on your experiences as a student in a learning community both in the online and face-to-face courses will be used to understand what some of the difficulties are and what are the good aspects of this mode of course delivery.

Who is doing it?
This research is part of a Masters of Social Science being completed by Lisa Harris at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and is supervised by Dr. Patricia Moynihan and Dr. Belinda Probert.

What does it involve?
Data will be collected from 15 to 20 interviews and participant’s responses will be collated and analysed to provide a better understand of your experience of online learning. These interviews are non-structured (there are no set questions for the interview) and will take about 1 to 1 ½ hours. During the interview you are free to talk about anything relating to your experiences in SP120, you do not need to discuss specific areas or topics.

Confidentiality?
The interviews will be taped, using a small handheld tape recorder, and later transcribed to assist with analysis. Lisa Harris will store the tapes and transcripts of the interviews for a period of 5 years, in accordance with RMIT’s policy on data for Masters and Ph.D research projects. If you chose to participate in this research project you can be assured that all information you disclose during the interview will be kept in a confidential manner. As a participant you will be allocated a number and all future references to your interview will use this number. If you are quoted directly in the final research document, your permission will formally be sought and you have the absolute right to veto the inclusion of any or all your quote/s. This final research document, or excerpts from it may be published.

When and Where?
Lisa Harris will be able to meet you at a location of your choice and at a time that suits you.

Who do I contact for more information?
If you want to participate in this research project and are willing to be interviewed or if you have any questions regarding this research please contact Lisa Harris on 9332 7978 or by mobile on 0409 94 87 80 or via email: lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au
Appendix

RMIT Faculty of the Constructed Environment
School of Social Science and Planning

Consent form for persons being interviewed

Name of participant:

Project Title: **Online learning: Is the experience of community a key factor in successful online learning environments?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of investigator(s)</th>
<th>Tel: (bus)</th>
<th>Tel: (home)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Harris</td>
<td>0409 94 87 80</td>
<td>03 9332 7978</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. I consent to participate in the above research project. This research project has been explained to me and I have read and kept a plain language description of the research.

2. I have agreed to participate in an interview or answer a questionnaire.

3. I acknowledge that:

   - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data.
   - The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching and may not directly benefit me.
   - My anonymity and the confidentiality of information provided is assured.
   - The security of the data obtained is assured following completion of the study.
   - The research outcomes may be published and a report will be provided to me.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _______

(Participant)

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _______

(Investigator)

Any queries or complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Chair of the Faculty of the Constructed Environment Research Ethics Sub-Committee, RMIT, GPO Box 2476 V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is 9925 3957.
First Case Study - Interview Guide:

What year level are you?

What program are you studying?

What course did you study online?

Have you studied other courses online?

In a traditional face-to-face tutorial what characterises a “good” tutorial, when it works well for you what is happening?

Given that this course is also offered in a traditional face to face mode, why did you decide to do this course online?

How is your tutorial contact different in online classes compared to face-to-face tutorials?

What are some of the things you liked about the online tutorial experience?

What were the worst aspects of doing this course online or what didn’t you like about it?

How often did you go “online”?

Typically how long did you stay online?

In other courses have you connected up with people outside of tutorial/class time?

In face-to-face classes did you have a sense of community with other students, if yes, how was this played out or experienced, if no, what would you have expected?

How does this compare to online classes?

Supplementary Questions:

Who do you talk to at Uni?

How much time do you spend at Uni each week?

What do you do when you are there?

Do you go to Uni for any other events?
Second Case Study – Research information

Dear MA IT Management Student,

This letter is requesting contact information from you in order to seek your involvement in a doctoral research project at a latter time (within the next four months). Your involvement is likely to include either responding to an email based survey or participating in a one-on-one interview (via an online chat room). The type and nature of your involvement with the project will be defined by you. Details of the project are as follows.

Doctoral Research Project: What is the significance of community in online learning environments?

Primary investigator: Lisa Harris (lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au)
Supervisor: Dr Belinda Probert (belinda.probert@rmit.edu.au)

This doctoral research project is exploring the significance of community in online learning environments. For the purpose of this project “community” is loosely defined by the following points:

• As a sense of connection or a sense of the ‘social’ between students, and/or
• The use of electronic environments or communication tools for social interaction, and/or
• Interactions between students that are non-course content related

This research project is exploring this subject through three case studies. Two are with different student cohorts in Melbourne, Australia and the third is exploring the use of the Virtual Social Space within the MA IT Management, Sheffield University.

The project will explore students’ use of this space by looking at the following points:

• The pattern of students’ use of the space? (do they use it, when, for what)
• If students’ don’t use the space, why, what other mechanisms do they use to communicate or have social interaction with each other?
• Do students form social/support networks with each other, if so how and for what purpose?

The project will seek input from current 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students as well as from students who have already graduated from the program. Your participation would be appreciated and your insights and those of your fellow students will be provided to the program development team as part of their continuing evaluation of the MA IT Management. Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on the email address provided above.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Harris.
Second Case Study – Personal Information Contact Sheet
Personal Information Contact details for MA IT Management
Students, Sheffield University.

The information provided on this form will be used by Lisa Harris from RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia to contact you in order to conduct research for a doctoral dissertation which is focusing on social spaces within online learning environments.

Name: ........................................................................................................

Year: 1 2 3

Email address: ..............................................................................................

Mail address (in the format it would need to appear on an envelope)

...........................................................................................................

...........................................................................................................

...........................................................................................................

...........................................................................................................

...........................................................................................................

Please use the back of this form to write any comments, suggestion or questions you would like me to answer by email.
Second Case Study - Confirmation email to Students

Dear

This is just an email to ensure I have you email address correct and to let you know what is happening with the research projects that I talked about in the session at the Day School at Halifax Hall.

Miguel, Maggie and I have been working through a research design and believe the data collection tool we are likely to use will be either an email based survey or a web based form (which you electronically submit when completed). We are just working through the technical details involved but we are likely to email the survey to you (or email you with the web address) on Friday 21st June, 2002. The return date will be a week later, 28th June, 2002.

As I think I mentioned on Friday, we are interested in understanding the social support networks you may have developed as a student which support your learning processes, and which often go on to form the basis of profession networks after your studies are completed. This initial survey will be exploring your perceptions and use (or not) of the Virtual Social Space. It will also explore the type of communication mechanisms you have developed with other students and how these might relate to your learning processes. The data from this survey will be used by Maggie, Miguel and I to understand how the Virtual Social Space might be re-engineered to better support your learning processes. I will also be analyzing this data for my doctoral research. As such there will be a question on the survey requesting your permission for me to contact you by email if I have any questions or points of clarification from your survey that are relevant to my Ph.D. I will either clarify things with via email or else I may set up a discussion board within your online learning environment. If you do not want to take part in any further discussion of your survey please feel free to deny permission for me to contact you. If you do not want to take part in the survey please feel free to just ignore the email on Friday 21st June.

The analyzing of the data from the survey should take about a month and Maggie, Miguel and I will write up a paper on what you have said. This paper will be available to you about two months after the data collection process, all going to plan.

I thank you for this opportunity to work with you and look forward to bettering our understanding of how social spaces and social support networks within online learning environments are used.

Regards,

Lisa Harris
Second Case Study – Email survey

How to fill out this Virtual Social Space survey document.

This document has been created using Word for Windows 2000. It has very little formatting in order that you should have little trouble entering your responses. Simply read each question (usually marked x1, where x is the section identifier and 1 is the question number) and move your mouse pointer to the corresponding answer (usually marked ax1) and type in your reply. If a number of options are given for you to choose from, simply delete the options that you don’t want, leaving only the response you have chosen. For the qualitative questions feel free to be as verbose as you want. There is no limit to how much you can type into each response and all your thoughts and reflections will be helpful in us evaluating the social space. If you have any questions or problems completing the survey please feel free to email me at lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au and I will endeavor to resolve the issue. On a test run through, this survey took 20 minutes to complete. However, given the reflective nature of some of the questions it is expected that the time taken to complete this survey will vary from student to student.

Once you have completed the survey, please return it to me by attaching it to an email and sending it to me at lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au I will remove any identifying information and forward a coded copy of your response to Maggie and Miguel at Sheffield.

As you may remember, I am also using some of this data for my Ph.D. Because of the qualitative nature of many of the questions, there may be some points you raise in your responses that I would like further detail on or to clarify. As such I am requesting your permission to contact you via email for this purpose. This is completely voluntary and you should in no way feel any pressure to agree. Please delete whichever answer is not applicable below:

I am happy for Lisa Harris to contact me by email for the purpose of clarifying details of my responses to this survey. I understand that my responses and my email address are confidential and covered by both the UK and Australian Privacy Acts.

Or

I do not want Lisa Harris to contact me further regarding this survey.

Demographical data.

| d1: Name (ad1) |
| d2: Age (ad2) |
| d3: Gender (ad3) |
| d4: What is your first language? For instance English, Portuguese, Greek (ad4) |
| d5: Year of course 1 2 3 (ad5) |
| d6: Preferred email address (ad6) |
| d7: Undergraduate degree (ad7) |
| d8: Current occupation (ad8) |
| d9: Do you live in a rural or urban environment? (ad9) |
| d10: Where do you complete most of your online contact hours? Home based PC Work University Other (ad10) |
| d11: What type of computer do you use Mac PC (ad11) |
d12: How would you rate your Internet usage skills:
(adt12) Beginner Intermediate Advanced Professional

d13: Other than for study purposes how often would you access the Internet?
(adt13) Never most days once a week once a month occasionally

d14: Other than for study purposes how often would you use an online chat facility?
(adt14) Never most days once a week once a month occasionally

d15: Other than for study purposes how often would you use an online bulletin/discussion board?
(adt15) Never most days once a week once a month occasionally

d16: Other than for study purposes how often would you use Email distribution lists?
(adt16) Never most days once a week once a month occasionally

d17: Please leave the options that best describe your use email other than for study:

(adt17) Work
(adt17) social-friends/relatives who live in the same city as you
(adt17) social-friends/relatives who live in the same country but not in your city
(adt17) social-friends/relatives who live in another country

d18: Of those options defined as ‘social’ that you have chosen in the above question, estimate how many emails you would send a week

(adt18) 

d19: Please leave the options that best describe the main reason why you would choose a distance learning course.

(adt19) Prefer independent learning
(adt19) Work fulltime
(adt19) Child or other carer issues
(adt19) Travel issues
(adt19) Not willing to take a break from career
(adt19) Prefer studying alone
(adt20) Other (please define)

What learning style do you naturally adopt?
In the last four weeks you should have received the Honey and Mumford’s Learning Styles Questionnaire, this exercise helps you understand the learning style that most suits you. Loosely there are four possible categories: Activist, Reflector, Theorist or Pragmatist. If you haven’t already done so please complete the questionnaire (this will take about 15 minutes) and then continue on with this survey.

ls1: Please state which learning style you naturally tend towards:

(ats1) Activist
(ats1) Reflector
(ats1) Theorist
(ats1) Pragmatist

ls2: Please feel free to comment on your choice or on this exercise in general.

(ats2) 

Understanding the social networks that support learning
s1: How often do you visit the campus outside of the set workshop days in any given year?

(as1)
s2: Did you know anyone else (past or current student) studying the MA IT Management? Describe who they are and the nature of your relationship (friend, professional, etc.).

(as2)

s3: Have you had email contact with any other student of the MA IT Management that was not specifically course content related? Describe the nature of that contact and when, in the context of the course, it happened. (e.g. organizing a pub night in 2nd semester of 1st year).

(as3)

s4: Have you used email or phone contact with other students to clarify your understanding of course content related material? Describe the nature of that contact and when, in the context of the course, it happened.

(as4)

s5: Do you feel you have made connections with other members of the MA IT Management that you are likely to maintain after you have finished the course? Describe.

(as5)

s6: Have you met up with fellow students (in person) outside of the set day schools provided for in the course, if yes in what semester of what year of your studies (e.g. 2nd semester, 1st year I met up with three of the people in my module for dinner after the day school).

(as6)

s7: If you have met with fellow students in person describe how that contact was initiated and by whom and what types of communication medium you used in the process of setting up contact (e.g. phone, email, etc.)

(as7)

s8: What importance would you ascribe to the social contacts you have with other students in the programme?

(as8)

s9: If you don’t understand something in the set readings for a module, who would you most likely contact to help clarify your understanding and what medium would you use? (e.g. ring a fellow student, email a fellow student, post a question to a discussion board within the module, email or ring your tutor, arrange to meet a fellow student in a chat room to discuss it, speak to someone outside of the course, etc.)

(as9)

s10: If you didn’t understand some aspect of what was required from you as part of your Course work assessment in a particular module, who would you most likely contact to help clarify your understanding and what medium would you use? (e.g. ring a fellow student, email a fellow student, post a question to a discussion board within the module, email or ring your tutor, arrange to meet a fellow student in a chat room to discuss it, etc.)

(as10)

s11: Think back over the modules you have completed. Would you describe any of the discussions that occurred in the online learning environment as social? Describe what happened and what you thoughts and feeling were about it.

(as11)

s12: If you just wanted to leave a message for a fellow student, what method are you most likely to use? (phone, email, discussion, chat, other) Please describe.

(as12)

The Virtual Social Space (VSS)

The next 19 questions of this survey relate to the VSS, if you have never been into this space could you please pass your eye over these questions. Most you will not be able to answer specifically but some you might like to add some comment to, particularly if you think there are things that would be good to have in the VSS.

s13: Have you ever been into the VSS? (if no, go to question s18)

(as13)

s14: If yes, how did you hear about the VSS?

(as14)

s15: When did you first access the VSS?

(as15)
s16: How many times in any given year would you access the VSS and what would be the sort of thing you might access it for?
(as16)
s17: When was the last time you accessed the VSS?
(as17)
s18: If you have not been into the VSS, why do you think that might be? We are interested in getting as much detail from you here as possible, issues might include access problems, content not needed or relevant, not integrated into the rest of the online things I do for my studies, I just don’t ever think about it, I make contacts with students in other ways like …
(as18)

The VSS contains 3 main areas: The Work Zone; The Social Circle; The History Channel. We would like to explore each of these areas in some detail to gain an understanding of what you might use and why.

The **Work Zone** is an information area with information relating to academic contacts, course news, and student staff committee minutes.

s19: Have you ever been into this area of the VSS, if so when was the last time you accessed it and why?
(as19)
s20: If you have never been into this section of the VSS is this because you have obtained this information from somewhere else (if so please say where from) or that you haven’t needed to know any of the information contained, or some other reason?
(as20)
s21: What other types of information would you find useful to have in this area?
(as21)
s22: Do you think this information would be better placed elsewhere, if so please define (on the departments web page, in each course module, in printed form, on CD ROM, etc.)?
(as22)

The **History Channel** provides information like FAQ’s, information about past students and what they are doing now, and advice, contacts information.

s23: Have you ever been into this area of the VSS, if so when was the last time you accessed it and why?
(as23)
s24: If you have never been into this section of the VSS is this because you have obtained this information from somewhere else (if so please say where from) or that you haven’t needed to know any of the information contained, or some other reason?
(as24)
s25: What other types of information would you find useful to have in this area?
(as25)
s26: Do you think this information would be better placed elsewhere, if so please define (on the departments web page, in each course module, in printed form, on CD ROM, etc.)?
(as26)

The **Social Circle** provides areas like a portrait gallery, social contacts, chat environment, discussion board and social scene calendar.

s27: Have you ever been into this area of the VSS, if so when was the last time you accessed it and why?
(as27)
s28: If you have never been into this section of the VSS would you have any suggestions as to what might be important for you in something like this, or do you generally have other means of communicating with other students which means that you would never be likely to use such a space? Comment in as much detail as you can.
(as28)
s29: What do you think was good about the social space, what would you improve about the social space?
(as29)
s30: Would you see any advantage of continued access to the VSS once you have graduated from the programme? Could you elaborate?
(as30)
s31: Finally is there any other comments you would like to make?
(as31)
Third Case Study - Research Information
Doctoral Research Project: What is the significance of community in online learning environments?

Primary investigator: Lisa Harris (lisa.harris@rmit.edu.au)
Supervisor: Dr Belinda Probert (belinda.probert@rmit.edu.au)

This doctoral research project is exploring the significance of community in online learning environments. For the purpose of this project “community” is loosely defined by the following points:

- As a sense of connection or a sense of the ‘social’ between students, and/or
- The use of electronic environments or communication tools for social interaction, and/or
- Interactions between students that are non-course content related

The project is using three case studies to explore students’ experience of different online learning environments. The first is a group of undergraduate students studying a social science course at RMIT University, the second is a group of postgraduate students studying a MA IT Management at Sheffield University England, and the third is you lot!

For the other two groups I have used face-to-face interviews and questionnaires. For this group I am hoping to be able to access your journals and possibly run into you in the MOO and have chats. Obviously this group is very different from my other two case studies because I don’t know you identity and am not meeting up with you before you decide to participate. If you feel happy about me accessing your journal via Tiger or Geegee can you put your name on the Students’ Consent board which is located in my office in the MOO (next to Tigers and Geegee’s offices on the ground floor, there are instructions on the board). Your anonymity is assured as I don’t know who you are and will not be seeking any identifying information from you. Feel free to call me on 0409 948 780 if you want to chat about it, just use you Alias in the conversation so I don’t find out your name. Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

Regards…Surfgrrrl
Third Case Study – Followup email
Questions from surfgrrrl

Dear

Sorry to bother you again and for the delay in sending this to you after the face-to-face session. I wanted to make sure I got everything in this one email so I wouldn't have to bother you again. The following are a list of questions that have come up for me out of my experiences in the MOO with you and from reading the journals that people have agreed for me to have access to. My research is about trying to understand the nature and significance of networks of support (what I have termed community) in the online learning environment. If you don't want to answer this email please feel free to delete it, but it would be very useful to me if you can afford the time.

It should take about 5 minutes to complete, unless you really get into it (which I am secretly hoping you will because the more information you provide me the better I'll understand what you think about the type of support you think is useful in your study). Any information you provide to me in this email will be completely confidential. Your reply will be allocated a confidential code and neither my supervisors nor any RMIT staff members will have access to your original reply.

Just type in your answers below in a reply email or else cut and paste it into a word document and return it to me as an attachment (whatever you prefer).

Thanks for your time and I hope your studies have gone well in sem 2, 2002.

Regards,

Surfgrrrl (Lisa Harris)

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Age:

What year of your course are you in?

Have you done a course online before? If yes, how many and feel free to describe or comment about them.

Why did you decide to do this particular context curriculum course?

What were your expectations about developing any sense of 'connection' or 'friendship' with the people you studied within this course?

Was this different to what you would have expected if you were studying a course on campus?

Did you develop a sense of connection with anyone else studying this course, if so who (alias) and how would you describe that connection?

Did you ever go into the MOO with no specific reason, other than to just see who was there? (describe)

What were your two most memorable experiences in the MOO.
Do you think there was a 'sense of community' in the MOO? If yes, what do you think created this? If no, why do you think this might have been? (Feel free to use as much space as you would like to describe what you mean here)

Do you think a 'sense of connection' (or community) with other students is an important support in your study? (Feel free to use as much space as you would like to describe what you mean here)

During the last few weeks of the course a number of people decided to log into the MOO the night an assignment was due. I think there was about 5 or 6 of you (a few of you have mentioned this night in your journals). If you were one of the folk who logged in, can you tell me why you decided to log in, what you were hoping for and what happened? If you were not one of these people can you tell me if you had known that people were logged on, would you have joined them? If so why, if not why not?

How often did you log onto the MOO: (Delete whichever is NOT applicable)
Multiple time a day
Each day
More than 3 times a week
More than once a week

Thanks again.
Third Case Study - Typical MOO session

This MOO session provides an example of the type of engagement students had with each other out of the formal learning environment. It includes students providing assistance to each other, the use of humour and examples of students bringing aspects of their personal lives and real life interactions into their life in the MOO.

foxy_dance is going to try to join you.
foxy_dance has arrived.
foxy_dance says, "hi surfgrrrrl"
Surfgrrrl says, "hi sorry I was in the garden (avoiding the Ph.D"
foxy_dance says, "lol that sounds fun"
Surfgrrrl says, "you been in long"
foxy_dance says, "i didn’t think anyone would be on"
look foxy_dance
foxy_dance
----------
a average height girl with mango coloured hair and moves to the beat of the music all day long
She is awake and looks alert.
foxy_dance says, "no not really i checked my emails first"
foxy_dance says, "then saw you & i though i would come see you"
Surfgrrrl says, "yeah it has been a bit quiet of late"
Surfgrrrl smiles
foxy_dance nods
Surfgrrrl says, "did you go to the session last night"
foxy_dance says, "i hardly come on and when i do i get confused so bare with me"
foxy_dance says, "yeah i did"
Surfgrrrl nods knowing she has only just started to get the hang of it
foxy_dance says, "i am confused about our assignments maybe you can help me on that"
Surfgrrrl says, "i missed it unfortunately because I was travelling home to torquay"
Surfgrrrl says, "sure happy to read it and try and sus it out"
foxy_dance says, "its wonderful down there at torquay"
Surfgrrrl says, "where is the assignment described (yeah I love living here)"
foxy_dance asks, "the question is with our assignments do we have to hand them in some where or what do we do with them?"
Surfgrrrl says, "mmm..."
foxy_dance says, "cos i wrote it up but it says something about posting it some where"
foxy_dance confusion written all over her face
Surfgrrrl says, "maybe on the notice board, where is the assignment detailed"
foxy_dance says, "i'm not sure"
Surfgrrrl says, "in here or in the DLS RMIT online site"
< connected: WicketWarrick. Total online: 3 >
foxy_dance says, "i know it was written in the email that was sent" WicketWarrick is going to try to join you.
WicketWarrick has arrived.
Surfgrrrl says, "just the wookie we need"
WicketWarrick looks at the thumbs up sign on surfgrrrl's forehead! *grin*
foxy_dance says, "hi wicketwarrick"
WicketWarrick exclaims, "hi everyone!"
Surfgrrrl says, "yes more about that later..."
WicketWarrick asks, "what services may i offer you today?"
foxy_dance says, "well we were talking about our assignments"
Surfgrrrl says, "ww do you know what you are supposed to do with the assignment"
Surfgrrrl says, "post it somewhere?"
WicketWarrick asks, "which one?"
foxy_dance says, "the one about online relationships"
Surfgrrrl can hear the little wheels in the her favourite wookies head turning
WicketWarrick says, "hmmmm... more crearky than anything else!! lol"
WicketWarrick says, "i just wrote it on the whiteboard"
Surfgrrrl says, "in sem rm 4"
WicketWarrick asks, "isn't that where everythign is supposed to go?"
WicketWarrick says, "yeah.. i think so"
foxy_dance says, "i have no idea"
WicketWarrick says, "well..hope so..if not. i'll fail!! lol.."
foxy_dance says, "but its worth a try"
Surfgrrrl says, "i think WW is right, but i would fire off an email to Jan if you are not sure"
WicketWarrick asks, "at least put it thre and then ur covered... know what i eman?"
foxy_dance says, "lol i will fail first pretty much done nothing"
WicketWarrick says, "i got told off by gg..lol"
WicketWarrick says, "for nto writing any journals at all!! :)")"
foxy_dance laughs really hard and goes red
Surfgrrrl find feather duster to wack WW with
Surfgrrrl says, "bend over"
foxy_dance says, "thats at least one thing i do but only cos i'm not on enought to have to worry"
Surfgrrrl says, "and what is your reason for not doing the journal thing"
foxy_dance asks, "yeah ww whats your exchuse?"
foxy_dance says, "i better get going and do this assignment thing so i can go party"
WicketWarrick says, "sorry.boss came by"
foxy_dance says, "bye guys"
WicketWarrick says, "cya foxy"
Surfgrrrl says, "hang on Foxy dance I am"
WicketWarrick says, "nah..i've populated it now!! i've made up!! lol"
Surfgrrrl says, "Just checking the board"
WicketWarrick almost wets your pants and exclaims, "can you do that?! lol!!!!"
WicketWarrick says, "damn..shoudln't have written all those things abou tyou then!! :)")"
Surfgrrrl says, "no not THAT board unless you have consented, the DLS to see if the assignmnet info is there"
Surfgrrrl says, "which it isn't"
Surfgrrrl says, "maybe it is on the notice board in the foyer"
WicketWarrick exclaims, "oh ok!! lol..nah.. i did sign the consent form..so you can see it!"
Surfgrrrl says, "coooool "
WicketWarrick exclaims, "just ignore all the stuff i said about you .. k!? lol!"
Surfgrrrl wrings her hands in an evil ways, plans a coffee and a bit of a read latter today
foxy_dance goes out.
You exclaim, "is that right well I be stealing your grape bag and and well I am not sure what i'll do!"
WicketWarrick says, "oooh... lol.. which rreminds me"
WicketWarrick teleports Magical Bag of Grapes in. WicketWarrick takes a huge purple grape from the bag and munches into it. Surfgrrrrl eats grape Surfgrrrrl takes a huge purple grape from the bag and munches into it. WicketWarrick asks, "so what are you doing online so much?" WicketWarrick asks, "today anyway?!" Surfgrrrrl says, "mmmm" Surfgrrrrl says, "finally had the telephone point moved into my room so I can be online and still working on my Ph.D" Surfgrrrrl smiles and the benefits of having two little wires in her room WicketWarrick exclaims, "lol.. bet it's more online than Ph.D!" Surfgrrrrl says, "well lucky I am in the position of being able to say "I have been researching alllll DAY" Surfgrrrrl says, "even when I have spent the day talking to YOU" Surfgrrrrl says, "don't you feel all warm and fussy knowing you are helping another human being reach a higher state of learning" WicketWarrick exclaims, "when i'm not poking you with sharp objects and branding singson you!" WicketWarrick exclaims, "nods.. sorts.. i think.. as long as i'm not the one doign the thinking! " Surfgrrrrl lol while rubbing Savlon on forehead WicketWarrick thinks.. should ahve used a brand with the logo WW Surfgrrrrl glad WW has had this as an after thought Surfgrrrrl says, "how has you day been" WicketWarrick says, "lol.." WicketWarrick exclaims, "relatively hectic! but enjoying myself somewhat..managed to catch up wth a good friend over lunch!" WicketWarrick says, "but then..lunch finished.. and teh drivvle started again.. *sigh*" Surfgrrrrl says, "it is one of the nice things about being in town I reckon" Surfgrrrrl says, "i have friends that work in the city as well" Surfgrrrrl says, "or else people are willing to come in" WicketWarrick asks, "yeah.. but then it's not like you really ahve that much time to visit urf riensd though..is it?" Surfgrrrrl remembers life in the computer industry vs life now and nods Surfgrrrrl makes mental note 'must finish Ph.D in order to keep life now up' WicketWarrick asks, "sorry? keep life now up?" Surfgrrrrl says, "yes academic type life, much freer that having a real job" WicketWarrick asks, "yeah...but you reckon you coudl od that for the rest ofur life?" Surfgrrrrl says, "most academics think they work hard, and they do sort of " Surfgrrrrl says, "but the freedom of not HAVING to be in an office at 9am is something I am looking forward to" < connected: Jaro. Total online: 4 >
@who

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Player name</th>
<th>Connected</th>
<th>Idle time</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surfgrrrrl (#7156)</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>0 seconds</td>
<td>Visitng Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaro (#7160)</td>
<td>28 seconds</td>
<td>28 seconds</td>
<td>Dorm3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WicketWarrick (#7149)</td>
<td>26 minutes</td>
<td>4 minutes</td>
<td>Visitng Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foxy_dance (#7142)</td>
<td>48 minutes</td>
<td>9 minutes</td>
<td>Seminar Room 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Total: 4 players, 3 of whom have been active recently.
Surfgrrrl things boss is on the prowl again
page jaro "howdy
Your message has been sent.
You sense that Jaro is looking for you in dorm3.
He pages, "hey"
page jaro "just chatting with WW in here but I think WW boss is lurking
Your message has been sent.
Jaro is going to try to join you.
Jaro has arrived.
Jaro takes a delicate cluster of pinkish hued grapes from the bag and munches into it.
WicketWarrick exclaims, "hello!"
Surfgrrrl smiles and flicks salt water at jaro
Jaro is sore....
Surfgrrrl says, "why"
WicketWarrick says, ""
Jaro says, "i decided to go for a run today"
WicketWarrick exclaims, "sorry...yeah... this tiem was an important phone call!"
Jaro says, "since hockey finished last week and all"
Jaro says, "an hour later... and im f@cked"
WicketWarrick says, "lol.. i do put my body through pain too every monday and friday nite..."
Surfgrrrl thinks of muscles she use to have
Surfgrrrl thinks they are both mad
WicketWarrick pokes surfgrrrl..and nearly loses his finger..lol..
Surfgrrrl says, "yes surfing is it for me"
Jaro exclaims, "i ran to the beach!"
Jaro says, "touched the water tehn ran home"
Surfgrrrl says, "although I surfed for about 3hrs on Sunday and couldn't move on Mon"
Surfgrrrl says, "is the beach far away"
Jaro says, "i think 5km"
WicketWarrick asks, "heh heh... what's the wroost injury you've done to yourself?"
Surfgrrrl blinks
Jaro [to WicketWarrick]: probably tearing muscles
Surfgrrrl says, "well I put a circlar saw through two of my fingers in March, that wasn't much fun"
Surfgrrrl says, "also made it very hard to type"
Jaro says, "ouch"
Surfgrrrl thinks some people will do anything to avoid a PH.D
Jaro says, "power tools arent made for girls :P"
Surfgrrrl says, "you can imagine how much shit I have got about it"
Jaro says, "hehe yeah im sure"
WicketWarrick exclaims, "lol.. i meant whilst surfing!"
Surfgrrrl says, "particularly because I am very safety conscious with my power tools"
Surfgrrrl says, "surfing is cool you don't really hurt yourself much"
Jaro [to WicketWarrick]: i get a sore back surfing the net too much... does that count? :P
Surfgrrrl laughs
Surfgrrrl says, "i once got run over by this young whipper snaper, his fin cut my arm"
WicketWarrick grins.. i get the ache just behing my neck..is that the one?
Surfgrrrl nods knowingly
Surfgrrrl says, "got hit by my board once in very big seas ( too silly to come back in when it was too big for this little duck)"
WicketWarrick exclaims, "heh heh.. i gotta go gusy.. need to do some work..catchya all alter!"
Surfgrrrl waves to ww and rubs forehead
Jaro says, "cya wick"
Surfgrrrl says, "how has your day been jaro"
Jaro says, "not bad, havent done the hw i was supposed t thtough :("
Jaro asks, "yourself?"
Surfgrrrl nods knowingly (unfortunately)
Surfgrrrl says, "not bad "
Surfgrrrl says, "been wandering around the Garden and the surf is going off today so I might try and do some"
Jaro says, "hehe nod"
Surfgrrrl says, "writing and have a surf latter today"
Surfgrrrl says, "how many courses you doing Jaro"
Jaro says, "doing 3 subjects, and 1 context"
Surfgrrrl says, "heavy load really"
Jaro says, "nahlh"
Jaro says, "its not a full load"
Surfgrrrl says, "what is a fullload"
Jaro says, "4 subjects"
Jaro says, "cc are half subjects"
Surfgrrrl nods
Surfgrrrl says, "this is a context isn't"
Jaro says, "so im basicaly doing 3.5 subjects"
Surfgrrrl says, "it"
Jaro says, "yeah this is context"
Surfgrrrl says, "do you have to make up the .5"
Jaro says, "nahh, my course change while i was doing it"
Jaro says, "so i benefitted"
Surfgrrrl nods
Surfgrrrl says, "that happened to me as well, i think I got off pretty easy"
Jaro says, "i think i did better than wicket, he just found out hes 2 subjects down"
Jaro says, "and we're both final sem, final year"
Surfgrrrl says, "yeah hopefully he can pick something up online or something"
Surfgrrrl says, "maybe do something over summer"
Surfgrrrl says, "it would be good for you to be able to graduate together"
Jaro asks, "hey how come i just got an email about the research consent?"
Jaro asks, "i sent in the form, was ther eonly 1 form to sign?"
Surfgrrrl says, "nna that has been the problem, most people have done the consent for the other project, but they don't realise they need to do it for this one as well"
Jaro asks, "there is two?"
Jaro asks, "why didnt they send me two forms then?"
Surfgrrrl says, "because the Psych dept are running the program they are sticklers over that sor tof thing"
Jaro says, "thats dumb imho"
Jaro says, "would have been easier for me to just sign two forms and im done"
Surfgrrrl says, "probably my fault that I didn't try and piggy back the two together but the issues with consent for projects"
Surfgrrrl says, "like this one is that you have to show that there is no confusion about"
Surfgrrrl says, "what people are agreeing to"
Jaro asks, "ok so what do i have to do for my consent?"
Surfgrrrl says, "anyway id you are happy to play just return the email to Jan and she will advise me of your consent"
Surfgrrrl smiles
Jaro says, "ok"
Surfgrrrl says, "it has been a stress, i thought i would have to
ditch the project because only 4 people had consented and that isn't
a big enough sample"
Jaro says, "im in :)
Jaro says, "just no probes plz :P"
Surfgrrrl rubs neck and feels tension melting away
Surfgrrrl says, "trust me I'm almost a doctor...."
Surfgrrrl says, "as a friend of my says 'i am in a room full of
doctors and i can't get a bloody drug out of one of you!'"
Jaro says, "hehe"
Surfgrrrl says, "so have you been doing your Journal stuff, WW was
saying GG had been after him about it"
Jaro says, "i do my journal most of the time"
Jaro says, "the main problem ive had is that ive only been to 1 onlin
meeting"
Jaro says, "which was the first"
Jaro says, "i havent been able to go to the others"
Surfgrrrl pins gold star on jaro's jacket
Surfgrrrl cloak even
Surfgrrrl says, "mmm it is that tension when designing online
courses"
Jaro says, "they should have give a time for this subject"
Surfgrrrl says, "in some ways you don't want to have too much live
stuff"
Jaro says, "7-9 every wed for instance"
Jaro says, "then we all meet every week then and do stuff"
Surfgrrrl says, "but it is also when people get connected together"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "would have been a little eaier and better organised"
Surfgrrrl says, "I think you are spot on"
Surfgrrrl says, "if the times were set when you signed up you could
orgaise your life"
Jaro says, "yeah"
Jaro says, "and most of the meetings have been wed night"
Jaro says, "when ive got a clas"
Surfgrrrl nods

Jaro asks, "so what do you have to do for your research?"
Surfgrrrl says, "yeah stuff like that you should feed back to tiger
so e can put it into planning for next year"
Jaro says, "any questions or anything you need to ask me? :P"
Surfgrrrl says, "no I am going to read you journals, I am interested
in the significance of community in online learning environments"
Surfgrrrl says, "how people connect with each other"
Jaro asks, "and your using just this moo?"
Jaro asks, "or other places as well?"
Surfgrrrl says, "develop support networks "
Surfgrrrl says, "3 case studies"
Surfgrrrl says, "one with undergrad students in social science which
took a very basic online course"
Surfgrrrl says, "no facilities for the development of community"
Surfgrrrl says, "the second is from England and a group of MA IT
management students"
Surfgrrrl says, "their online course had a dedicated Virtual Social
Space "
Jaro says, "nod"
Surfgrrrl says, "it was very separate from the course and none of
them used it, yet they "
Surfgrrrl says, "went to a lot of trouble via email and meeting up to generate those social"
Surfgrrrl says, "support networks"
Surfgrrrl says, "so I met them and surveyed them about there use of the VSS"
Surfgrrrl says, "the final case study is you lot"
Jaro says, ";)"
Surfgrrrl says, "I am interested in what you think about, what your observations are about community, etc as you progress through this course"
Jaro asks, "as in what I think about the others students etc?"
Surfgrrrl says, "not exactly more about adhoc comments people might make in their journals about chance encounters with people in here"
Surfgrrrl says, "other virtual communities you might be part of"
Surfgrrrl says, "frustrations, etc"
Jaro asks, "what do you mean by chance encounters with ppl?"
Surfgrrrl says, "well one of the things that came up from the first case study was that ppl reflected about being on campus"
Surfgrrrl says, "and how you ran into ppl, had a coffee, etc"
Surfgrrrl says, "during this process ppl develop connections with each other that allow them to draw on that relationship when they need to"
Jaro says, "nod...."
Surfgrrrl says, "e.g I don't understand what the point of the lecture was...."
Surfgrrrl says, "it is the possibility of just running into someone that may form the basis of this (i am not sure)"
Surfgrrrl says, "in the literature about face-to-face community this point is mentioned"
Surfgrrrl takes deep breath
Jaro says, "hehe well done"
Jaro says, "ive no idea what your talking about, but you sound smart to me :P"
Surfgrrrl laughs
Surfgrrrl says, "think about it, remember when you first started uni"
Jaro says, "ill just try right as much as i can in my journal, so hopefully it helps you some how"
Jaro says, "yeah"
Surfgrrrl says, "those few minutes in the hall way before the lecture started or else in the lecture theater"
Surfgrrrl says, "you sort of chat about nothing with people"
Jaro says, "yeah"
Surfgrrrl says, "but at the same time you are getting a sense of how friendly they are"
Jaro says, "nod"
Surfgrrrl says, "if they think a bit like you, etc"
Surfgrrrl says, "you create a wee bit of a bond with them"
Jaro says, "nod"
Jaro says, "but what if you were to shy to talk to ppl at the start"
Surfgrrrl says, "my point is this sense of connect to the other person allows you to trust them that little bit"
Surfgrrrl says, "(all the more important)"
Jaro says, "but only start to say hello when you recognised a few similar faces at similar classes"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "thats how it was for me"
Jaro says, "cause first year classes we all big, like 300+ ppl doing them"
Jaro says, "you never saw the same ppl twice"
Surfgrrrl says, "in online courses, apart from this one, there is usually very little opportunity for people"
Jaro says, "nod"
Surfgrrrl says, "to shoot the breeze about nothing"
Jaro says, "id almost say ppl do online classes to shy away from ppl at times"
Surfgrrrl says, "it is all content, content, content - and yet the online learning literature"
Surfgrrrl nods
Surfgrrrl says, "says that it is really important to develop a sense of community for learners"
Surfgrrrl says, "but we don't design that into our courses"
Jaro asks, "ahh ok, and thats your research yeah?"
Surfgrrrl nods and blows on fingers
Jaro says, "ahh ok i understand"
Jaro says, "like the small groups you form at uni after a cuople of years"
Jaro says, "the ppl you hang around with and work together etc..."
Surfgrrrl says, "YES exactly"
Jaro says, "but online you dont have that"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "well not to the same extent as you do irl"
Surfgrrrl says, "and research about those groups you hang arround in says if you are part of one, you do better at uni"
Surfgrrrl says, "because you have people to bounce ideas off in a non threatening environment"
Jaro says, "nodder, i heavily agree there"
Jaro says, "i see ppl with no friends at uni... they don’t seem to do so well"
Surfgrrrl says, "they are at most risk of dropping out"
Jaro says, "ive got an example of that this semester"
Surfgrrrl says, "mmm"
Jaro says, "was 3 of us, i knew the other guy from previous subjects"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "and major assignment comes up"
Jaro says, "and we're asked to work in pairs"
Jaro says, "so me and the guy i know team up"
Jaro says, "the otehr guy is left out"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "we say we'll help him"
Jaro says, "as best we can in a way which won’t hurt our work"
Surfgrrrl says, "nods"
Jaro says, "cause the assigment you could work alone if you wanted"
Jaro says, "anyway comes time for assessment and he’s not there"
Jaro says, "my partner says he dropped out of the subject"
Surfgrrrl nods
Jaro says, "and this guy was final year final sem, he had this subject and 1 other and he was finished"
Surfgrrrl shakes head
Jaro says, "boggles me that he could drop out like that"
Jaro says, "but he didnt know anyone else in the subject... and i dunno"
Surfgrrrl says, "yeah I guess it just gets too hard for people"
Jaro says, "i felt bad though, almost a lil bit of guilt"
Surfgrrrl says, "you see I think it is an issue with the way we design things"
Jaro asks, "how so?"
Surfgrrrl says, "it shouldn't be the students responsibility to feel like they have to look out for everybody"
Surfgrrrl says, "There has been research into irl teaching at uni"
Surfgrrrl says, "that suggests we (uni teachers) should build learning communities"
Surfgrrrl says, "in first year for undergrad students"
Surfgrrrl says, "this gives everybody a "group" to belong to, even if it is abit artificial"
Jaro says, "nod, its funny how some of the first group you do at uni affects you"
Jaro says, "i see guys that worked together first year, still happily grouping together now"
Surfgrrrl nods remembering back to wacko days with her mates
Surfgrrrl remembers drinking too much and laughing about rude comments about shocking teachers in course
Jaro laughs
Third Case - Logged MOO Conference Session

10 people are connected.

--->
*** Connected ***
RMIT Tokyo Building

You have entered the foyer of the RMIT Tokyo Building. Around the walls you see pictures of alumni. You recognize some famous faces. To your right is a noticeboard. Type LOOK NOTICEBOARD to see what is on it.

You see Noticeboard.
You see foxy_dance (Asleep), Flemmex, GeeGee, and Tiger standing about.

Obvious exits: out and hall

There have been changes to the news items. Please type "news" to see the headlines of the current news items.

< connected: the_ginger_cat. Total online: 11 >
GeeGee says, "SKF, the Information for the journal is on the notice board here in the MOO"
GeeGee Waves at tiger, Flemmex, Ziggy and the ginger cat
lucifar is going to try to join you.
lucifar has arrived.
Flemmex waves at lucifar.
Ziggy is going to try to join you.
Ziggy has arrived.
Flemmex waves at Ziggy.
lucifar says, "hi Flemmex"
< connected: Bunkka. Total online: 12 >
Flemmex says, "Are you all ok?"
Ziggy says, "why yes thank you"
GeeGee says, "hi lucifar, Bunkka - welcome"
the_ginger_cat yawns and stretches
lucifar says, "yeah just making my way there"
lucifar says, "hi GeeGee"
lucifar leaves for the hall.
the_ginger_cat ambles off to the seminar to sit on someone's lap.

----------------------------------------

Ground Floor Hall
----------------
You are standing in the hall. Off the hall are three doors, one leading to Tiger's Office, one leading to GeeGee's Office and a third leading to the Visiting Research Fellow's Office. At the north end of the hall is a courtyard. The seminar rooms open off this courtyard.

lucifar is here.
Obvious exits: foyer, Courtyard, Tiger's Office, upstairs, GeeGee's Office, and Visiting Research Fellow

----------------------------------------

lucifar goes north.

----------------------------------------

Courtyard
---------
You are standing in the Courtyard. There is a shallow reflecting pool over which hangs a weeping cherry. Two wooden seats are placed near the pool. The sun shines gently into the courtyard and some birds chirp in the tree. The tall windows of the seminar rooms overlook the courtyard.

Cafe tables and chairs spill out through the open french windows of a warm, bright cafe. You can just see glimpses of people sitting inside, drinking coffee and chatting peacefully, while the strains of a live jazz quartet waft to you on the breeze.

SKF and lucifar are here.
Obvious exits: hall, Seminar2, Seminar1, seminar3, Seminar4, VC Project Room, and cafe

----------------------------------------

SKF goes out.

----------------------------------------

Seminar Room 1
--------------
You are in Seminar Room 1. Unlike nearly every other tute room at RMIT there is no rubbish on the floor and the walls are painted a tasteful cream. The lounge chairs are arranged around low coffee tables. There are a few handouts lying around, which might be important.
There is a blackboard on one wall. To read what's on it, type LOOK BLACK
You see Aurian and Londongal standing about.
Obvious exits: Courtyard

----------------------------------------
Londongal says, "do you know what's going on tonight?"
Aerith is going to try to join you.
You say, "Prrrt!"
Aerith has arrived.
Aurian pets the cat
Tiger has arrived.
Aerith says, "thanks Aurian"
Aerith says, "LOOK BLACK"
Aurian says, "no problem - anytime"
GeeGee has arrived.
the_ginger_cat purrs loudly.
Ziggy is going to try to join you.
Ziggy has arrived.
Tiger says, "hi Ziggy. Good to see you."
GeeGee waves at the students who have arrived
Aerith says, "Aurian I type @home and it doesn't bring me to RMIT foyer"
Ziggy says, "Hi, thanks tiger"
Tiger goes out.
Aurian says, "Where does it take you?"
Aerith says, "hehehehe I got lost....keeps going back anf forth in the Narita airport and platform 1 n 2"
Aerith says, "it didn't bring me anywhere"
SKF has arrived.
Aurian [to Aerith]: Ack, oh no
Bunkka has arrived.
Aerith says, "i haven't set the home i guess try to set it but can't"
GeeGee glad to see you got back safely, Japanese traffic is a killer
Aerith says, ":) lucky you online already"
< connected: JackyChan. Total online: 13 >
Aurian chuckles - what can I say, I'm an addict
Aerith says, "hi everyone :)"
SKF says, "sorry GeeGee I will do the assignment tonight is that ok?"
GeeGee says, " Hi JackyChan, nice to see you"
lucifar has arrived.
GeeGee says, "SKF, that's fine"
SKF smiles
GeeGee says, "hi lucifar"
Aerith says, ":) (to Aurian) addicted to here already?:)"
JackyChan is going to try to join you.
JackyChan has arrived.
Aurian [to Aerith]: more as a general thing, but this is an intriguing place to lurk
Aerith says, "i starts to feel so...:) I will try and see if i can get it right next time without paging for help heheheh"
the_ginger_cat sniffs around JackyChan's ankles.
Aerith says, "i thought i might find my way somehow. but guess....:("
GeeGee says, "that's the fun of being in a place like this"
Aerith says, "that's true...:)
JackyChan says, "hello"
lucifar says, "hi"
Aerith says, "this is really new for me....i haven't been to such a place that i could actually get lost"
Aerith says, ":)"
Bunkka says, "hi all"
GeeGee says, "hello JackieChan, Bunkka"
Aurian [to Bunkka]: hey there
SKF says, "heeeeeelo every body"
< connected: Surfgrrrl. Total online: 14 >
< connected: Fidelius. Total online: 15 >
Aerith says, "heelloooowww :) is everyone here already?"
Fidelius is going to try to join you.
JackyChan says, "hi hi"
Fidelius has arrived.
Londongal waves to everyone
Aurian does @who
GeeGee says, "Hi Fidelius, surfgrrrrl"
Aurian says, "wow, it's filling up"
Surfgrrrl has arrived.
GeeGee says, "we are going to need more chairs "
Fidelius Hello everyone
Tiger has arrived.
Aerith says, "")"
Aurian [to GeeGee]: how many are there?
SKF says, "haha"
Surfgrrrl waves to everybody
SKF says, "present"
Aurian waves to surfgrrrl
GeeGee says, "so far, 15!"
< connected: mango. Total online: 16 >
Aurian says, "successful turnout"
GeeGee GeeGee waves at everyone!
Bunkka says, "how many are doing the course?"
Tiger says, "We have about 16 at last count"
Aerith says, "at first i thought we are going to a real conference...hehehe"
SKF says, "GeeGee how many of these online meetings will there be?"
Tiger is impressed with the punctuality!
Aurian [to Surfgrrrl]: only menus :P
Londongal says, "and when are the next ones?"
Bunkka says, "will make for an interesting chat session!"
Surfgrrrl says, "we are at a real conference, aren't we?"
Aerith says, "i mean i thought it's a real room, didn't know it's virtual...:)
GeeGee says, "perhaps another couple on another night, why? "
Surfgrrrl says, "oh my god i forgot my body!"
SKF says, "me to Aerith I was like wtf isnt this an online course? hahahaha all my friends laughed at me when I told them, I had been whinging hahaha"
mango has arrived.
Aurian waves to mango
GeeGee says, "Hi Mango, nice to see you"
You can't go that way.
Obvious exits: Courtyard
Aerith says, "to SKF...didn't u know when u register?:)"
Flemmex has arrived.
mango says, "Hello all."
Aerith says, "i got a bit confused at first, i still am now heheheh"
Surfgrrrl waves at flemmex
Aerith says, "hi mango"
Flemmex waves at Surfgrrrl.
< connected: Jaro. Total online: 17 >
SKF says, "yeah but when I got an email saying compulsory confrence room 1......well it didnt click for a day or two lol"
Tiger says, "I think we have four more students to come"
GeeGee says, "For the next synchronous meeting, we will get Jan to email you and let you know"
Aerith says, "i still can't get the action thing...i will get it soon...*crossing my fingers*"
Jaro is going to try to join you.
Jaro has arrived.
GeeGee says, "Hi Jaro"
< connected: foxy_dance. Total online: 18 >
Aurian waves at Jaro
Aerith says, "to SKF....yup same here hehehehhe infact until today then i realised"
GeeGee says, "Hi Foxy_dancer"
Jaro says, "hi all, hope im not late"
SKF says, "I wish all my subjects were like this"
Aerith says, "heheheh i wish too...:)"
GeeGee says, "SKF - that's what we like to hear"
JackyChan says, "I agree"
Aerith waves around?
Surfgrrrl says, "why is that SKF"
Aerith says, "oh ok thanks Tiger"
Aerith says, ":)
SKF says, "its like IRC with assignments =)"
Bunkka says, "at least we wouldn't have to spend our lives in that little building on bourke st!"
Aurian [to SKF]: *chuckles*

====Flemmex makes a suggestion====

Type WATCH
Flemmex says, "This will turn on your login watcher if it isn't already on."

===== End message =====

Aerith waves and waves to everyone
Aerith says, "what happened after the WATCH?"
Surfgrrrl says, "?"
SKF says, "OK, I'm now watching logins. =)"
Aerith says, "hehehehe"
Bunkka says, "you'll see when people log in"
the_ginger_cat [to Aerith]: Did you type watch?
Aerith says, "oh ok....."
Tiger says, "let's hope someone logs on!"
Aerith says, "yup i did....:) comes out that sentence but guess no one logs in yet so...."
SKF says, "lol @ tiger"
Tiger offers coffee and cake
Surfgrrrl thinks flemmex is laughing quietly
SKF says, "how do I accept"
Aurian accepts cake graciously
Bunkka says, "thankya."
Aerith says, "wuaaaaaa :)
< connected: curious [Guest]. Total online: 19 >
lucifar says, "thanks muchly"
Londongal says, "thanks :)"
mango says, "mmmmmm "
Aurian notices a login
Flemmex says, "There you go - someone just logged in"
Flemmex says, "Did you all see that?"
Aurian [to Flemmex]: very useful :
Surfgrrrl says, "yes"
JackyChan says, "yes"
Bunkka says, "it was curious wasnt it"
Fidelius says
Aerith says, ":)
"mango says, "yep"
Aerith says, "thanks"
lucifar says, "yeah"
Aerith says, "how many more we have to wait before this starts?"
Aerith says, "i mean the conference :)
SKF says, "[to GeeGee or anyone who nkows] what do we do in these classes exactly?"
Tiger says, "we're waiting on enlightened_one and nveeus"
Aerith says, "tiger you know everyone already?"
Surfgrrrl says, "aren't we all!!"
Tiger [to SKF]: You'r about tp find out!
SKF says, "ha"
Aerith says, "hiihihihi"

Aurian is prepared for anything as long as there's cake
Tiger [to Aerith]: I'm one of the tutors so I better know you all
Aerith prepares more cakes and desserts :) 
JackyChan says, "I still can't find ejournal in the hub, can anyone tell me please... thanks"
Tiger says, "plenty of cake Aurian. There's another one in the oven."
Aerith says, "oh really? hehehe ok... no wonder you sounds so sure"
Aurian says, "Ahh, I wondered about that aspect also, JAckyChan"
GeeGee says, "Tiger, what about getting into the groups, I don't think enlightened one or nveeus are going to make it"
foxy_dance is going to try to join you.
foxy_dance has arrived.
GeeGee waves at foxy-dancer
Bunkka says, "jackychan its at the RMIT online hub, above the blackboard section"
JackyChan says, "mm..."
Fidelius hello foxy
Tiger says, "Good idea GeeGee. let's make a start"
SKF says, "[JackyChan] when you log in to the hub, under the course "Personal Identity lalala" is Ejournal"
Aurian stand patiently
foxy_dance says, "sorry i'm late"
SKF says, "sure"
SKF says, "you can sit up the back with the other trend setters"
lucifar says, "we'll forgive u this time"
Flemmex waves at foxy dance.
Tiger says, "why don't you all make yourselves comfortable"
JackyChan says, "ok I will take a look, thanks"
Flemmex [to foxy_dance]: Hi there!
SKF says, "NP"
Aurian pulls up a chair
Surfgrrrl waves to all again because she is a bit excited
foxy_dance says, "hi there flemmex hows it going?"
SKF waves back
Aerith says, "")"
Flemmex [to foxy_dance]: Good thanks! Just finishing dinner.
foxy_dance smiles
Aerith test
Aerith jumps around
Flemmex slurps some vegies out of the bottom of the bowl
Tiger coughs and tries to settle everyone down
SKF says, "eeeeeew"
foxy_dance laughs
Aerith walks around looks at everyone smile
GeeGee says, "GeeGee didn't need to know that!"
Bunkka sits on the rug
GeeGee says, "Flemmex's vegies that is"
Surfgrrrl says, "go for it tiger"
Flemmex agrees about tiger going for it.
Aerith stands waiting for instructions :)
SKF puts hand up
SKF says, "present"
Tiger says, "OK everyone. Welcome to Personal Identity and Community
In Cyberspace"
Aerith looks at Tiger waiting for further speech? ;)
Tiger says, "You probably all know Flemmex - our trusty technical
support person and all round MOO expert"
There is a muttering and nodding and rhubarbing.
SKF says, "are you ok tiger?"
Flemmex takes a bow.
Surfgrrrl nods and smiles at Flemmex
Aerith smiles at Flemmex
SKF thanks Flemmex
Tiger says, "And by now you've worked out that GeeGee and I are the
tutors"
Aerith says, "I will need lots of help"
Aerith says, "thanks first...:)"
mango says, "me too"
JackyChan says, "Flemmex helps me a lot... thanks to u"
SKF says, "shhhhhhh"
Flemmex [to Aerith]: there is no quota. Ask as many questions as you
want.
SKF says, "hehehe"
Tiger beckons to Surfgrrrl
Aerith says, "thank u...:)"
Surfgrrrl says, "okay Tiger you want me to go"
SKF says, "?"
SKF says, "go"
Tiger says, "And Surfgrrrl is one of our researchers"
Flemmex [to Surfgrrrl]: Your turn to bow.
Surfgrrrl bow
Flemmex digs Surfgrrrl in the ribs.
SKF claps
Tiger slaps Flemmex with a furry paw
Aerith smiles at Surfgrrrl ;)
Tiger says, "Settle down Flemmex"
Flemmex says, "Ouch!"
Aerith says, ":)"
Flemmex mutters and sulks.
Bunkka looks around eagerly
Surfgrrrl rubs flemmex arm
SKF comforts Flemmex
SKF says, "=)"
Surfgrrrl says, "no cool with me"
Surfgrrrl says, "i might just say a few words and get it over with"
Flemmex winks but shuts up for a bit to let Tigger get on with it.
GeeGee says, "If we don't get a move on the hour will be up and the
cleaners will be in to clean up all the crumbs!"
Bunkka says, "when i type LOOK, several of the others are
(distracted) does this mean they are in a another group?"
Bunkka says, "ignore that, carry on with what you were going to say"
Flemmex [to Bunkka]: No, they just haven't typed anything for a
while.
Surfgrrrl says, "just to let people know I am doing a Ph.D and have
an office with the others "
Bunkka says, "ahh"
GeeGee says, "Tiger, go ahead"
Tiger says, "OK - so there are two reasons for us getting together to
night..."
Tiger says, "1. to get to know each other. (and what a good lookin' group we are!)"
Aerith smiles
Tiger says, "2. To agree on some norms for our group"
Surfgrrrl nods
GeeGee preens
Aerith says, "what is norms?"
SKF says, "whats normal"
Tiger says, "so let's start with an activity designed to do both things..."
Aerith says, "thanks"
Aerith
Tiger says, "we'd like to get you into some small groups to talk about a couple of things..."
Tiger says, "so let's get you into groups, then tell you what you have to do. OK?"
Aurian nods
SKF says, "ummmmm"
Aerith says, "ok"
Tiger says, "we'd like to get you into some small groups to talk about a couple of things..."
Aerith says, "thanks"
Aerith)
Tiger says, "we'd like to get you into some small groups to talk about a couple of things..."
Aerith says, "ok"
Aerith says, "ok"
Tiger says, "Aurian, Bunkka, Mango and SKF - you're group 1"
Londongal says, "rightio :)
SKF says, "k"
Bunkka says, "ok"
Tiger says, "Jaro, Fidelius, JackyChan and Ziggy - Gorup 2"
JackyChan says, "ok"
Fidelius says, "ok"
Ziggy says, "ok"
Tiger says, "Londongal, Aerith, and Lucifar - group 3"
Aerith says, "ok"
Londongal says, "yep"
lucifar says, "yep"
SKF says, "sorry if im a bit slow eating dinner =)"
Tiger says, "oops - foxy_dance I forgot you!"
Aerith says, "hi foxy"
Aerith smiles at lucifar and londongal
Tiger says, "you are meant to be in Group 3 - sooooooory"
foxy_dance says, "yeah you did"
Tiger says, "Did i forget anyone?"
lucifar says, "yeah group 3"
Aerith says, "hi foxy"
foxy_dance smiles
foxy_dance says, "hi ya Aerith"
Aerith says, " :)"
Aurian [to Tiger]: so will we be spilling off into different rooms now?
Tiger says, "In a minute GeeGee will tell you what to do...
< connected: WicketWarrick. Total online: 20 >
Tiger says, "but yes you can go wherever you want in the MOO"
Surfgrrrl worries tiger has a sore paw
< connected: EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE. Total online: 21 >
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE is going to try to join you.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE has arrived.
SKF says, "lol @ surfgrrrl"
Tiger smiles at Surfgrrrl
Bunkka says, "puntuality at its best!"
WicketWarrick has arrived.
WicketWarrick sheepish..sorry i'm late..
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "sorry...late too...had a late class..
Tiger says, "hey welcome EnLiGhTeNeD-OnE and WicketWarrick"
SKF says, "hey"
Aerith says, " ;-)"
Fidelius waves
WicketWarrick says, "hey aerith! how's cloud?"
Aerith only knows how to smile :)
Aurian says, "That's usually my way in an offline class"
GeeGee says, "Hi Wicketwarrick, EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE (or EO for short)"
Tiger says, "we're just getting into groups..."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE blushes
Surfgrrrl smiles enlightened_one
WicketWarrick waves back to fidelios!
Aerith says, "cloud is good...:)"
WicketWarrick says, "hey geegee!"
GeeGee waves back
Tiger says, "We'll deal with you two later comers in a moment"
WicketWarrick wonders if he missed much?
Aerith says, "hiihihi"
Tiger sharpens her claws!
WicketWarrick offers tiger a grape as a peace pipe...
Flemmex drops Group 1's butchers paper.
Aerith says, "hahahahah"  
Flemmex drops Group 2's butchers paper.
Flemmex drops Group 3's butchers paper.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE watches quietly
Bunkka says, "at least there not being thrown today!"
Flemmex waves at EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE.
Aerith says, ":)"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE waves back to Flemmex
Aurian says, "or mixed with old prunes"
GeeGee says, "In your groups, you need to come up with some rules concerning Netiquette for our group"
WicketWarrick smiles! true!
Tiger says, "Now your task is to talk about two things: What do you think are the three most important principles of netiquette we should adopt in this class?"
Flemmex says, "Someone from each group should grab their butcher's paper"
WicketWarrick says, "hey nothing wrightht he prunes ok!!!!"
Aurian picks up Group 1's butchers paper.
Tiger says, "and what are you expectations from the course"
WicketWarrick says, "which group am i in?"
SKF says, "can we draw on the blackboard?"
foxy_dance says, "who is in group 3"
Londongal grabs group 3's paper
Tiger [to WicketWarrick]: As a late comer you have to severly punished before you can be allocated to a group
lucifar says, "me"
Aerith says, "me group 3"
WicketWarrick says, "thanks fllemmex"
Flemmex [to SKF]: You can write on it
SKF says, "how?"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE wonders if he shares wickets fate....
lucifar says, "haha"
WicketWarrick looks sad... grape..or even maybe a prune can't fix the problem?!
Flemmex says, "Oooh ooooh can I punish Wicky?"
foxy_dance smiles at people from group 3
Fidelius grabs group's 2 paper
Aerith says, "hahahhaa"
Tiger says, "enlightened and Wicket can be a group"
Flemmex bounces up and down a bit.
Surfgrrrl says, "do people know how to write on it"
GeeGee the cat o nine tails is warming up for the late comers
Londongal smiles to foxy_dance
lucifar smile at foxy_dance
Aerith says, "dun smile at me cos me dunno wat to do...:)"
Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: i'll save the lightning as their fate
later
Flemmex will explain about how to write in the butcher's paper in a
minute when Tiger says to.
WicketWarrick says, "aurian.. you read the menu yet? at teh cafe?"
Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: *chuckles* indeed I have
Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: havent' broken through the chains yet
SKF says, "when we starting the task??????"
WicketWarrick says, "heh heh.. did ya look again today?!"
Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: and I added to it :)
Tiger says, "Anyone unsure what to do?"
GeeGee says, "let's have some shuuuush and get moving with the task
or we will be here till midnight"
SKF says, "affirmative"
foxy_dance yarns
WicketWarrick sniggers.... midnite..woohoo!
Tiger says, "Ok Flemmex - instructions for the butcher's paper"
Ziggy says, "So where do our groups go?"
WicketWarrick [to Aurian]: did ya like my grape menu?!
Tiger moves WicketWarrick and Aurian to opposite sides of the room
SKF slaps Wicket
SKF yaaaaaaaah
Aerith says, "wuahahaha"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE is going to try to join you.
Aurian chucklers
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE steps out.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE has arrived.
lucifar says, "instructions???
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE knocks politely to see if he may enter.
Aerith waiting waiting
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE is going to try to join you.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE steps out.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE has arrived.
SKF says, "moving right along"
Aerith opens the door fro Enlightened one
Aerith says, ":)"

< disconnected: Yoshi. Total online: 20 >
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "Aurith thanx..."
Aerith says, "ur welcome...:)
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE is going to try to join you.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE steps out.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE has arrived.
----------------- Mex pastes -------------
How to write on your butcher's paper
====================================
Make sure the butcher's paper is on the floor in your room. You can't
write on it if it is in someone's pocket.

If you want to write "I think it is raining" on the Group 1 piece of
butcher's paper, do this:

write "I think it is raining" on G1
G1 = Group 1's paper
G2 = Group 2's paper
G3 = Group 3's paper
------------------------ end paste ------------------------
Flemmex hopes that is clear
Aerith says, "Group3" on G3"
Aurian [to Flemmex]: understood
Flemmex says, "G3"
Aerith says, "hey it's not working"
mango says, "I think?"
Aurian [to Aerith]: only if you have the paper
Londongal says, "sounds easy enough :) but how to pick it up? :p"
Aerith says, "how to get the paper?"
Flemmex [to Aurian]: Only if the paper is on the floor
Aerith says, "hehehehe"
Tiger says, "ok you have 10 minutes. Go anywhere you want. The coffee is good in the cafe. See you soon. "
WicketWarrick says, "so which group am i in?"
mango says, "where to gi"
Aerith says, "so where is our groups' paper?"
Flemmex says, "You don't have to pick it up"
lucifar says, "group 3 where to go"
Tiger says, "And anytime you're not sure what to do, remember you can page Flemmex, me, GeeGee or Surfgrrrl."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "your with me, Wicket..."
Ziggy says, "where does group 2 wanna go?"
Londongal says, "i don't know Aerith!"
Flemmex says, "Aurian has G1"
WicketWarrick says, "just the 2 of us?"
Aurian [to Group 1's butchers paper]: 1 Where shall we go?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "yep...the lat comers group..."
Flemmex laughs.
Aerith says, "me dunno too..... Flemmex help? Tiger help? Surfgrrl help?"
SKF says, "Aurial wherever"
Aerith says, ":)")"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "look"
Flemmex [to Aurian]: When did you start talking to butcher's paper?
Fidelius says, " What about the cafe"
Aerith says, "look"
Jaro picks up Group 2's butchers paper.
Aurian [to Flemmex]: apparently now :P
Flemmex [to Aerith]: Which group are you in?
Aerith says, "group3"
SKF says, "Arieth where is our paper?"
Ziggy says, "sounds good fidelius.. lead the way"
WicketWarrick reckons late comers rule!! and we get discounts at the cafe!!! *grin*
lucifar says, "does group3 want to go to the cafe?"
Surfgrrrrl says, "tiger maybe you could list the groups again"
Flemmex [to Aerith]: try typing WRITE "TESTING" ON G3
Aerith says, "sure why not? but how to get there?"
Londongal says, "yep lucifar - sounds good to me"
Aurian says, "Group 1: where are we going?"
WicketWarrick wonders.. enlightened one and i are group..3?
Fidelius says, "see you at the cafe G3"
JackyChan says, "try to write something, Jaro..."
Tiger says, "Group 1 - Aurian, Bunkka, Mango, SKF"
Bunkka is looks lost and runs around frantically to find group 1
Aerith says, "oh ok thanks flemmex"
mango says, "How bout the seminar3 (G1)"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE laigs my ASS off..
Fidelius goes out.
Flemmex beams at Aerith.
Tiger says, "Group 2 - Jaro, Fidelius, JackyChan, Ziggy"
Ziggy says, "jaro..where to?"
Londongal goes out.
foxy_dance says, "lets go group 3"
Aurian [to mango]: - okay then [group 1 to seminar3]
Aurian goes out.
Ziggy says, "yes taiger"
Tiger says, "group 3 Londongal, Aerith, Lucifar, Foxy_dance"
mango says, "SEE YOU THERE"
SKF says, "ARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRrr"
mango goes out.
lucifar goes out.
Flemmex thinks someone ought to go to the cafe
Bunkka says, "so group one stays here"
WicketWarrick waves catnip around.... tiger!!! what group am i in?
just me and enligtenement?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE takes a look at the map of Japan.
SKF goes out.
foxy_dance goes out
Aerith says, "errr.....how to get out of here and go to cafe?"
Ziggy steps out.
Tiger [to WicketWarrick]: Correct
Surfgrrrl waves at you all
Flemmex [to Aerith]: Type OUT then CAFE
WicketWarrick says, "lol!!! you pps should have come here more
often!!"
JackyChan goes out.
Aerith says, "thanks again Flemmex....see? told u i will need ur help
a lot...:)
"Surfgrrrl says, "i'll go to the cafe"
Jaro goes out.
Surfgrrrl says, "bye"
Flemmex smiles at Aerith.
Aerith goes out.
Surfgrrrl goes out.
WicketWarrick searches in bag and grabs catnip and gives to
flemmex... help..puhleeessssseee
GeeGee geegee puts feet up and waits for the results
WicketWarrick goes out.
Tiger [to Flemmex]: Is there paper for our latercomer's group?
foxy_dance follows surfgrrrl out the door
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE goes out.
Tiger wonders if GeeGee will be doing any work at all tonight!!!
Bunkka clicking furiously to avoid prowling call center supervisors
Flemmex goes out.
Bunkka says, "so how is group one looking?"
Bunkka says, "yep."
Bunkka says, "couldnt get out of it"
foxy_dance steps out.
Bunkka says, "but ive got it all sorted"
Tiger [to Bunkka]: They've gone to seminar room 3
Bunkka says, "will go there now"
Tiger says, "bye"
Bunkka goes out.
GeeGee goes out.
Seminar Room 1
-------------
You are in Seminar Room 1. Unlike nearly every other tute room at
RMIT there is no rubbish on the floor and the walls are painted a
tasteful cream. The lounge chairs are arranged around low coffee
tables. There are a few handouts lying around, which might be important.
There is a blackboard on one wall. To read what's on it, type LOOK BLACK
You see Tiger standing about.
You see Group 3's butchers paper.
Obvious exits: Courtyard
Tiger goes out.
Tiger has arrived.
Seminar Room 1
--------------
You are in Seminar Room 1. Unlike nearly every other tute room at RMIT there is no rubbish on the floor and the walls are painted a tasteful cream. The lounge chairs are arranged around low coffee tables. There are a few handouts lying around, which might be important.
There is a blackboard on one wall. To read what's on it, type LOOK BLACK
You see Tiger standing about.
You see Group 3's butchers paper.
Obvious exits: Courtyard
Aerith has arrived.
Aerith picks up Group 3's butchers paper.
Aerith goes out.
Tiger goes out.
GeeGee has arrived.
GeeGee goes out.
< disconnected: Guest.  Total online: 19 >
< disconnected: mango.  Total online: 18 >
Bunkka has arrived.
Bunkka goes out.
Aurian has arrived.
SKF has arrived.
Tiger has arrived.
Aurian says, "whoops, forgot the sheet"
Aurian goes out.
Aurian has arrived.
Aurian drops Group 2's butchers paper.
GeeGee has arrived.
Aurian chuckles - as per usual, I forgot the paper -_
Aurian drops Group 1's butchers paper.
Ziggy is going to try to join you.
Ziggy has arrived.
SKF says, "Aurian how do you pick the paper up?"
JackyChan has arrived.
Aurian [to SKF]: you type 'get g1' or you can look at it by typing 'look g1'
SKF says, "ta"
Jaro [to SKF]: or try read g1
JackyChan says, "read g1"
SKF says, "thanks guys =)"
SKF says, "GeeGee whats goin on now?"
Ziggy says, "how do you get moomail?"
GeeGee says, "we are all going to get together in seminar1 to wrap it up"
Tiger says, "will fill you in on MOOmail when we've finished here. OK? "
WicketWarrick has arrived.
Seminar Room 1
--------------
You are in Seminar Room 1. Unlike nearly every other tute room at RMIT there is no rubbish on the floor and the walls are painted a tasteful cream. The lounge chairs are arranged around low coffee tables. There are a few handouts lying around, which might be important.
There is a blackboard on one wall. To read what's on it, type LOOK BLACK
You see SKF, Tiger, Bunkka, Jaro, Aurian, GeeGee, Ziggy, JackyChan, and WicketWarrick standing about.
You see Group 2's butchers paper and Group 1's butchers paper.
Obvious exits: Courtyard
WicketWarrick drops Group 4's butcher's paper.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE is going to try to join you.
Ziggy says, "ok"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE has arrived.
Tiger says, "just waiting on a few still in the cafe"
lucifar has arrived.
WicketWarrick says, "how you going tiger?"
Londongal has arrived.
< disconnected: Fidelius. Total online: 17 >
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE hums quietly, aimlessly..
WicketWarrick waves to londongal and offers grape!
Aerith has arrived.
< connected: Fidelius. Total online: 18 >
Surfgrrrl has arrived.
Tiger says, "good thanks Wicket. "
Londongal says, "thanks WW :"
WicketWarrick offers grape to aerith..and one more for cloud.. sorry to hear about your death in ff7
Tiger says, "ok - we're all back!"
Aerith says, "hi lucifar...here here...:)"
Aurian steps on WW and watches a little whine
Aerith says, "oh i forgot"
Londongal offers more jellybeans!
Aerith says, "wait i go back n get it"
Aerith goes out.
Aurian prefers Sephiroth anyhow
WicketWarrick thinks..that netiquette work shop didn't do much for aurian...
the_ginger_cat . o O ( There is Fidelius? )
Aerith has arrived.
Aurian chuckles [oh dear]
Aerith says, "me back...:) with the paper"
Aerith says, "do i just drop it here?"
lucifar says, "thanks aerith"
Aerith says, "ur welcome"
Londongal says, ":)"
Aerith says, ":)"
Fidelius has arrived.
Tiger says, "Can someone get Fidelius from seminar 2 and foxy-dance from the cafe? "
WicketWarrick thinks.. can't remember anymore ff7 or 8 characters
Aerith drops Group 3's butchers paper.
foxy_dance has arrived.
Flemmex has arrived.
Fidelius says, "I'm here!!!"
foxy_dance says, "cool"
Aerith says, "ww how about tifa?:)"
foxy_dance says, "so am i eventually"
Aerith says, ":)"
GeeGee says, "Since we are all back and everyone has produced a
magnificent effort, this first time, let's see if we can wrap up what
you have been discussing or have I forgotten someone?"

WicketWarrick thinks...tifa was pretty hot too... aerith was the geeky
one with glasses rite?

Tiger sits on Wicket
lucifar says, "yay"
Aerith says, "no not with glasses...or is it?hehehe"

Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: who met their demise

Aerith says, "no there's no glasses"

WicketWarrick grape juice leaks from wickets puch...
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE laughs at all the crazy ppl..

Tiger says, "Hey focus please people"

Flemmex reads G1 and is very impressed.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE thinks to himself, who left the funny farm gates
open?

Londongal says, "lol"

EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE composes himself...

Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: It was I.

EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE laughs

SKF says, "I gotta run soon will we be here much longer?"

Flemmex waves the key to the funny farm.

Aurian reads G3's paper and knows who wrote some of it
Surfgrrrl read G1 and is supper impressed

Aurian [to WicketWarrick]: who met their demise

WicketWarrick wonders...how did you get the key to my room flemmex!? *Grin*

Aerith says, "hehehe (smiles to Aurian)"

Bunkka says, "G1 is a quality outfit. what do you expect from?!?!"

Bunkka says, "us"

Bunkka says, "if only i could type properly...."

Bunkka says, "look b3"

EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE picks up Group 1's butchers paper.

Aerith, says, "gee i feel so bad for writing so badly sorry group3
people"

foxy_dance flicks her hair over her sholder

lucifar says, "thats okay"

foxy_dance says, "no dont worry about it"

Londongal says, "it's all good"

Surfgrrrl says, "Aerith you did great"

Aerith says, "i will do better next time....i hope"

EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE drops Group 1's butchers paper.

Aerith says, "thanks...;)"

lucifar says, "i think there should be some more encouragement"

WicketWarrick agrees..gives aerith two grapes!

Flemmex [to Aerith]: All that spellin and puchuashun, greatly over-
rated if you ask me.

WicketWarrick sniggers

Aerith says, ":) thanks WW"

WicketWarrick laughs...

Aerith says, "puchuashun???

foxy_dance hugs aerith

Flemmex [to Aerith]: Yeah you wanna make something of it?

Aerith smiles gratefully

WicketWarrick watches grapes drip between foxy and aerith

lucifar says, "are we done yet????"

Flemmex grins at Aerith.

SKF says, "is this class over?"

Aerith says, "what is puchuashun?:)"

foxy_dance says, "i wanna go"

Aurian watches display of affection with keen interest
Flemmex can't type proper or spell proper
WicketWarrick says, "lol!! it's punctuation in a funny spelling!"
lucifar says, "can we go??"
Aerith says, "hehheeh ok....:)"
JackyChan waiting....
WicketWarrick puts away ewok dikshunary
foxy_dance says, "lol like my type of spelling"
SKF says, "flemmex its cant spell GOOD!"
SKF says, "lol"
WicketWarrick says, "you trying to imply that we are SPUTID?!?!?!!?"
Surfgrrrl says, " I vote for an amnesty on spelling"
WicketWarrick sniggers
Aerith says, "hahahahaha"
GeeGee says, "To sum up, the points that seem to have been raised by
the groups include politeness, respect, friendliness and help for
others, not abusing and one that I thought was most interesing, only
swearing and adult themes at appropriate times (?)"
Flemmex cracks up
SKF nods I
Aurian chuckles
lucifar says, "yay adult themes"
WicketWarrick sniggers
Aerith chuckles
foxy_dance says, "mmmm interesting"
Flemmex says, "Our next topic is to define appropriate times."
SKF says, "appropriate times?"
lucifar says, "can we have a special room for that"
Surfgrrrl says, "could I have the times again for the adult themes?"
Aurian the boudoire?
Aerith says, "hiihihhi"
Jaro says, "well to swear now in front of everybody wdln't be
appropriate"
Aurian says, "gah, that's a 'say'"
SKF says, "hehehehe"
WicketWarrick says, "i'm in for adult themes!!!"
Flemmex [to lucifar]: I think that is what your rooms are for. They
are private spaces.
WicketWarrick rubs hand gleefully
Surfgrrrl says, "for research purposes only of course.."
lucifar says, "of course....."
GeeGee laughs heartily
SKF quickly searches the halls for an empty closet
JackyChan says, "agree with Jaro"
foxy_dance says, "deffently"
WicketWarrick wants to join in on research with surrgurl...
Aerith looks with a blank face
foxy_dance grins
Aurian quickly casts CURE ALL
Aerith says, ":)"
Tiger hides head in hands
Surfgrrrl says, "in my office later ww"
Aerith says, "ahahahhaha"
Flemmex says, "the other thing that intrigues me is, what about not
giving out personal information?"
lucifar says, "the secret is out"
Surfgrrrl pats tiger on the paw
WicketWarrick fishes in pouch for mana... passes to aerith
SKF says, "Tiger is this class still on"
Aerith says, "Aurian plays game too:()"
WicketWarrick thinks woohoo..wait til he tells other ewoks!
Flemmex says, "Did everyone read all the butcher's papers?"
EnLiGhTEned_OnE says, "personal information...stalking"
Aerith says, "not all yet"
Aurian [to Flemmex]: important point
Tiger says, "We're nearly done."
WicketWarrick agrees that personal information should not be given out...
Bunkka says, "unless you want to"
Aurian [to Bunkka]: that's my belief also
Aerith says, "ok finished reading"
WicketWarrick thinks ..in this environment it's not so bad...
Bunkka says, "but i guess not in this course until it's over..."
Aerith says, "can definitely abide to all of them...no prob :)"
GeeGee says, "Anyone who wants to stay can do so but we will understand if you have other things to do"
Aurian says, "It depends on whether or not you're used to being open/closed online"
WicketWarrick in real life icq.. friendly ewoks have been hurt b4...:(
Aurian nods at WW - I have much to say on the matter also
Aerith says, "what is ewoks?"
WicketWarrick looks aghast?!?!?
Bunkka says, "thanks all! look forward to having more chats, have to pretend to work for a couple more hours....enjoy!"
WicketWarrick sniffs
Bunkka (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: Bunkka. Total online: 17 >
Tiger stands or chair and attracts everyone attention with a loud whistle
WicketWarrick eats grapes...
foxy_dance says, "see ya everyone"
WicketWarrick looks at tiger..
Aerith says, "see ya foxy"
foxy_dance stands to leave
WicketWarrick says, "cya foxy"
Surfgrrrl waves at Bunkka
Tiger says, "Ok everyone We're done. See you soon"
Flemmex waves.
Ziggy says, "bye"
Londongal says, "bye!"
lucifar says, "cya"
Tiger waves
Jaro says, "bye all"
Aerith says, "WW did i put up a wrong question?"
Ziggy (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: Ziggy. Total online: 16 >
lucifar goes out.
Aerith says, "bye"
Aurian waves an notices the emptiness
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE wonders if tiger is onna do a dance??
JackyChan says, "good night"
foxy_dance (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: foxy_dance. Total online: 15 >
Fidelius cya
WicketWarrick says bye all
< disconnected: lucifar. Total online: 14 >
GeeGee waves goodnight to all the group
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "everyone going??"
Tiger dances for enlightened one
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "nite all..."
WicketWarrick says, "what do you mean aerith?"
Flemmex says, "Good session huh!"
SKF says, "cya all next time =) was fun, thanks GeeGee"
Jaro says, "ohh can i keep my groups butcher paper? i wanna play with it :)")"
Aerith says, "looks like"
GeeGee (Asleep) have disconnected.
Jaro picks up Group 2's butchers paper.
JackyChan (Asleep) has disconnected.
Aerith says, "i was asking wat is ewoks mean?"
WicketWarrick says, "cya jaro!"
Aurian picks up Group 1's butchers paper.
Flemmex [to Jaro]: Do you want your own notepad?
SKF goes out.
Flemmex pokes at Jaro.
Fidelius goes out.
Aerith says, "sorry...:")"
Aurian chuckles
Aerith says, "she hasn't seen...:")"
Aurian poor people
Jaro [to Flemmex]: yeah
Flemmex [to Jaro]: It is yours. Write on it, describe it etc.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "haven't you seen star wars??????"
WicketWarrick says, "you watched star wars episode 45?"
SKF goes out.
Flemmex pokes at Jaro.
Aerith says, "sorry...:")"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "he hasn't seen star wars????"
Aurian chuckles
Aerith says, "she hasn't seen...:")"
Aurian poor people
Flemmex [to Jaro]: It is yours. Write on it, describe it etc.
Aurian prefers Star Ocean: Second Story ^^
WicketWarrick laugs at Aerith
WicketWarrick wonders..what is star ocean?
Aerith looks at everyone with a blank face again
Flemmex [to Aerith]: Correct
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "later Jaro"
WicketWarrick hope syou dont' kill to many pps in rctw
Flemmex [to Aerith]: Did you see the film Final Fantasy?
Aurian waves to Jaro
Jaro goes home.
Aerith says, "i did"
< disconnected: Jaro. Total online: 9 >
WicketWarrick says, "cya jaro!"
Aerith says, "Spirits withing rite?"
Londongal says, "see you all later :)
WicketWarrick says, " you keep that robe clean now!"
Aerith says, "see u londongal"
WicketWarrick says, "cya london gal!"
WicketWarrick Waves
Flemmex [to Aerith]: er.....
Flemmex waves at Londongal.
Londongal says, "bye!"
Aerith says, "no flemmex?"
Flemmex [to Londongal]: See you
Londongal (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: Londongal. Total online: 8 >
WicketWarrick says, "says..yeap spirits within"
Aerith says, "which ff movie?"
Flemmex [to Aerith]: No flemmex what?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE disappears to make some food..be back shortly..
WicketWarrick says, "only one ff isn't there? movie that is"
Flemmex says, "Oh yes - that's right"
Aerith says, "i mean the movie...:)
Surfgrrrl says, "amazing"
Flemmex [to Surfgrrrl]: What is amazing?
WicketWarrick looks quiziccaly at suffgrrrl
Aerith says, "what about?"
The housekeeper arrives to cart Bunkka (Asleep) off to bed.
Aerith says, ":""
Aurian says, "FF1 and 2 are being rereleased on PS1"
Aerith says, "ahahahaha"
WicketWarrick grin
Aerith says, "oh yeah but not very nice to play though"
Aerith says, ":""
Tiger says, "Flemmex Do you think GeeGee got cut off or did they just leave?"
Flemmex says, "PS1? how come?"
Aerith says, "FF4 n 5 is alrite though"
WicketWarrick hanging out for star wars knights of the old republic
Flemmex [to Tiger]: Not sure.
The housekeeper arrives to cart Ziggy (Asleep) off to bed.
The housekeeper arrives to cart foxy_dance (Asleep) off to bed.
Aerith says, "eh Aurian, have u watched FRUIT BASKET?"
WicketWarrick feels sad..everyone has left.....
Aurian [to Aerith]: Only ep1
Aerith says, "me still here...:""
WicketWarrick sniffs
The housekeeper arrives to cart GeeGee (Asleep) off to bed.
The housekeeper arrives to cart JackyChan (Asleep) off to bed.
Aurian lurks around, alternating between MOO/IRC
Aerith says, ":""
Flemmex thinks the housekeeper is having a busy time
Aerith says, "so everyone left eh?"
Aerith says, "hehehehehe"
Flemmex pokes at Aurian.
Aerith says, ":""
WicketWarrick wonders what tiger thinks of tonite
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "still here.."
Aurian is pliable
Flemmex [to Aurian]: tell *them* I said hi.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "have food now."
WicketWarrick same with research person..is that you surrffgurl?
Flemmex waves at EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE.
Surfgrrrl says, "i hope the house keeper is getting paid overtime"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE smiles enjoiy..
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: How did you find it then? You must have
some other chatty background to have caught on so fast
Tiger wonders what the students thought of tonite
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE waves to Flemmex
Aerith says, "i think tonite is good"
WicketWarrick had fun... a bit messy..but fun!!
Aurian [to Tiger]: Had a little trouble keeping up when everyone was
in the one room
Surfgrrrl thinks how am i going to use this for my Ph.D
WicketWarrick wipes grape stains from fur
Aerith says, ":) a bit fast at times but i managed to keep on track
with the screen flow"
Aerith says, ":)"
Flemmex agrees about the messy bits and the fun
Surfgrrrl nods
WicketWarrick says that surrffgurl should put grapes in Ph.D report
Tiger says, "yes messy is a good word for it"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex Yeah...I have spent a fair bit of
time online...mirc, ICQ, yahoo, MSN....not quite and addict, but
yeah..."
Surfgrrrl says, "that and kissing of hands"
Aerith says, ":)"
WicketWarrick glowers.... and the research later..*blush*
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: It sure makes a difference to something
new.
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: Ever used a text VR like this before?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex was good...sort of hard
though...everyone talking at once...we need a conch (from lord of da
flies) or something."
Tiger says, "gotta go. Thanks for you input everyone. "
Flemmex grins.
Flemmex waves at Tiger.
WicketWarrick upset!! no conch..leathered prune!!!
Surfgrrrl waves at tiger
Aerith says, "bye tiger"
Tiger waves to everyone
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "nite Tiger...rrrrrrrr"
WicketWarrick waves to tiger!
The housekeeper arrives to cart Londongal (Asleep) off to bed.
Aerith says, ":)
Tiger says, "purrs"
Aerith says, "i gotta go too....bye everyone"
Tiger (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: Tiger. Total online: 7 >
Aerith says, "thank u for everything"
Flemmex says, "We can have more elaborate tools but to begin with we
didn't want to have too many new things"
Aerith says, "flemmex thanks heaps"
Flemmex waves at Aerith.
WicketWarrick waves to aerith! goodnite!
Aerith says, ":)
Flemmex [to Aerith]: No prob!
Aerith says, "nite nite"
Flemmex waves.
Aerith goes out.
Flemmex says, "nitey nite"
WicketWarrick throws grapes at her!!! on the house!
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex yes...I actually play an online MUD...similar to MOO...you can check it out by putting this into the run program in your start menu."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "telnet 203.9.148.9 3333"
< disconnected: Aerith. Total online: 6 >
Surfgrrrl waves Aer
Aurian says, "mmm...MUD"
Flemmex says, "what mud is it?"
Surfgrrrl waves Aerith
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "I can't remember the name....dungeons and dragons type of setting."
Surfgrrrl says, "okay folks I'm off for a spa after all that typing" WicketWarrick agrees. fat fingers hurt
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex hang on...will open it now..."
Surfgrrrl says, "i might see you round campus or in my office"
Flemmex waves.
WicketWarrick wonders...never sees surfgrrrl
Surfgrrrl says, "i am a coffee addict so i will be in the cafe a bit i suspect"
Flemmex [to Surfgrrrl]: It was a good session. Take care!
Aurian says, "because surfgrrrl stays in the "visiting researcher" office"
WicketWarrick grins! i work at the cafe!
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex its called Domina"
Aurian says, "I pilfer from the cafe"
WicketWarrick says, "how do i get in that office"
Surfgrrrl waves to all
Surfgrrrl says, "bye"
Flemmex [to WicketWarrick]: The door is always an option....
WicketWarrick waves to surrgrrl
Flemmex waves at Surfgrrrl.
WicketWarrick says, "but what od i type?"
Surfgrrrl smailes
WicketWarrick says, "do itype vr?"
Flemmex [to WicketWarrick]: Try the initials
Surfgrrrl smiles even
WicketWarrick says, "ic... thanks!"
Flemmex [to WicketWarrick]: Summat like htat
Surfgrrrl (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: Surfgrrrl. Total online: 5 >
WicketWarrick wonders if we can put a beach here...so surrfgurl can surf?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "what about a wave pool?"
Aurian says, "We also need a bottomless pit"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "then I could get my body out..."
WicketWarrick edges away from aurian
Aurian says, "big labyrinth with no exit *cackles*"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "body board..."
WicketWarrick looks at sundial on wrist...
The housekeeper arrives to cart Tiger (Asleep) off to bed.
WicketWarrick *yawns*
Flemmex sighs.
WicketWarrick thinks it is past ewoks sleeping time..
WicketWarrick looks in pouch and grabs a blanket..
Flemmex is a little weary too
Aurian doesn't want to have to get an early shut-eye
WicketWarrick gives blanket to Flemmex
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "to Flemmex that game is called Domina if u interested...the MUD one..."
Aurian dislikes 7am starts at work
WicketWarrick rummages through pouch again.. and takes another blanket with ninja turtles on it
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: What is your character called?
WicketWarrick agrees with aurian
Flemmex [to Aurian]: Ick!
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "ShadowWarrior"
WicketWarrick has to get up at 6.45
Flemmex will prolly haveto start early tomorrow too
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE laughs and points at WW
WicketWarrick wonders if he will c Flemmex on early tomorrrow?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "I got tomorrow off...sleep till at least 8...but then gotta do work...:"n
WicketWarrick waves goodbye!!!
Flemmex waves.
WicketWarrick says, "cya all!! have a good tiem and i'll catch up with later!!!!!!"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "later WW"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "look WW"
Aurian waves
Flemmex says, "I will come early"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "whoops"
Flemmex says, "ish"
WicketWarrick says, "as alig would say.... AIiIGghhhhh...
Aurian chuckles at EO
Flemmex waves.
WicketWarrick says, "8:30?"
WicketWarrick says, "approx"
WicketWarrick lops off
WicketWarrick goes out.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "u all net fiends then?"
< disconnected: WicketWarrick. Total online: 4 >
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "how does this all tie into RMIT?"
The housekeeper arrives to cart Surfgrrrl (Asleep) off to bed.
Flemmex says, "in which way?"
Flemmex says, "Wicky and I just met for this coures."
Flemmex says, "course"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "hahah"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "coolz..."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "hey..."
Flemmex says, "just jit it off."
Flemmex says, "hit"
Flemmex grins.
Aurian says, "It happens online"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "hahaha"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "coolz..."
Flemmex says, "I like it when people really 'get it' and hang around"
Flemmex says, "hahahaha"
Flemmex says, "Yeah, it sure does"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "can turn into a habit though..."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "I used to be pretty bad.."
Flemmex says, "Oh this is all happening here because of my MOO habit"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "sleepin 4 hours a nite...dealin wit uni.."
Flemmex grins.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "not good..
Aurian laughs - you instigated this coursE"?
Flemmex says, "No, that is not good"
Flemmex says, "I got it happening in a MOO"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "hahaha"
Flemmex says, "before thata they didn't use any synchrnous stuff"
Aurian says, "ahh"
Flemmex says, "Just First Class"
Flemmex says, "and other stuff like htat"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "damnz...fight club on..
Flemmex says, "When I started working at RMIT, I suggested that it
would be more nteresting with lots of real time"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "look Flemmex"
Flemmex says, "Fight club?"
Flemmex cackles
Aurian says, "I expected this course to be all bulletin-board based,
and the like"
Flemmex winks and looks at Enlightened_One too
Flemmex says, "That isn't much fin"
Aurian rolls eyes - the IRCers are going on about that movie also
Flemmex says, "fun"
Flemmex cracks up at Aurian
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: Aurian is another treasure.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE blushes....damn, hate getting caught perving...
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "fight club rocks.."
Flemmex hopes to make some assignations with her too
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: WTF is fight club?
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "A MOVIE!!!"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "brad Pitts in it..
Flemmex says, "Yeah?"
Flemmex says, "Oh ok."
Aurian [to Flemmex]: that says it all
Flemmex says, "isn't a bit Brad Pitt fan"
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "on channel 9 right now.."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "yeah...
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "but this movie rocks..
Flemmex must be getting worn out, emoting for talk and vice versa
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "by the way, what is the next assessment, and
when is it due?"
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: how so?
Flemmex says, "Um - my handouts are at work. Log in tomorrow and I
will tell you."
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "just really interesting..
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "I find it funny..
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "what time???
Flemmex says, "lots of people mashing each other?"
Flemmex [to EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE]: Well I have told Wicky I will be here
at 8:30am so I had better be...
Aurian says, "little virtual private meeting :)
Flemmex could have breakfast with yous
Flemmex [to Aurian]: Not too private to include yous
Aurian cringes at the 'yous'
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "haaha"
Flemmex always says yous to the americans
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "fight club turns out to be escapism"
Flemmex amuses emself with english
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "I gonna bail..../
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE says, "laterz all...
Flemmex says, "besides, there *should* be a word 'yous'/
Flemmex waves at EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE.
EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE (Asleep) has disconnected.
< disconnected: EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE. Total online: 3 >
Aurian says, "well, there definitely is in my suburb :P"
Flemmex chortles.
Flemmex says, "i am fond of it. It is a practical word."
Aurian says, "at least it's not y'all"
Aurian says, "Where are you?"
Flemmex says, "Indeed!"
Flemmex thinks y'all is perfectly ok in it's place, which is southern states of the USA
Flemmex guesses something like Broadmeadows/
Aurian chuckles
Aurian says, "close enough"
Flemmex says, "i used to teach there"
Flemmex says, "Pascoe vale?"
Aurian says, "I'm actually in Thomastown, so it's close"
Flemmex says, "geez! I started typing Thomastown and then stopped!"
Flemmex says, "do you by any chance know the Thomastown West Kindergarten?"
Aurian says, "*cue twilight zone*"
Flemmex does the 'doo dee doo doo' thing
Aurian says, "Yes, I know of it [I live on the other side of the suburb tohugh"
Flemmex beams.
Flemmex says, "I am sharing with the ex-director of it!"
Flemmex thinks they are called directors
Aurian says, "ahhh, you mean sharing living?"
Flemmex thinks Thomastown lost a good thing when Maggie left about a year ago
Flemmex nods.
Aurian quizzes the kindergarten teacher in her family [the teacher didn't work with Maggie]
Flemmex says, "I am in the process of building, and my delightful brother wal and his partner maggie are putting up with me/putting me up for a few months"
The housekeeper arrives to cart EnLiGhTeNeD_OnE (Asleep) off to bed.
Aurian says, "ahhh, building *sympathises*"
Aurian says, "you have tried it?"
Flemmex says, "The people next door have been bulding for over a year now - slow process"
Flemmex groans.
Aurian says, "and the year before that, the other neighbours extended!"
Aurian says, "So there are now two hulking houses stealing the sunlight"
Flemmex says, "I have this person who is supposed to be doing the concrete for my shed floor, and I swear he is ex-Broadmeadows adult literacy material"
Flemmex says, "Oh how annoying!"
Aurian says, "annoying also"
Flemmex says, "which is?"
Aurian says, "shed floor helpers"
Flemmex smiles and MOO and pats it, lovng all its ambiguities
Flemmex says, "Oh the dear boy!"
Flemmex says, "I have trapped him into doing the concrete this saturday."
Aurian says, "Not lured with carrots, I hope"
Flemmex says, "No, after waiting 5 weeks for something he said he would do in two, I went to visit him at his mum's house."
Flemmex grins.
Flemmex says, "embarassment works well"
Aurian laughs
Flemmex says, "I asked her to tell him it was saturday at the latest or no job@"
Flemmex says, "the next day, he delivered the reo"
Flemmex chuckles.
Aurian envisions the nagging of mothers
Flemmex says, "He is a little shit. He's been trying to get me to give him the key to the shed, but I don't want him to do it without me being there"
Aurian says, "Yes, that's warranted"
Flemmex says, "on Tuesday I took the day off work because he said he was going to do it then, but he didn't"
Flemmex says, "said the ready-mix people were all busy"
Flemmex snorts.
Flemmex whinges and moans.
Aurian attempts to sympathise
Flemmex says, "Anyway I just meant to say that I was building."
Flemmex grins.
Flemmex says, "What are they doing in that other window?"
Aurian chuckles
Flemmex says, "they're discussing the notion of becoming overlords"
Flemmex says, "Of what?"
Aurian says, "I told them to lay off the online strategy games :P"
Flemmex says, "Ah!"
Flemmex says, "Well you know what they say.... everyone's MOO is their castle..... something like that."
Flemmex says, "do you have a universe?"
Flemmex has a loonyverse
the_ginger_cat stretches and yawns.
Flemmex says, "Hello cat."
You say, "Prrrt?"
the_ginger_cat looks for fish.
Flemmex says, "No fish here."
Flemmex scratches tgc behind the ears.
the_ginger_cat purrs.
the_ginger_cat wanders off in search of mice and a warm place to sleep.

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Courtyard
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You are standing in the Courtyard. There is a shallow reflecting pool over which hangs a weeping cherry. Two wooden seats are placed near the pool. The sun shines gently into the courtyard and some birds chirp in the tree. The tall windows of the seminar rooms overlook the courtyard.

Cafe tables and chairs spill out through the open french windows of a warm, bright cafe. You can just see glimpses of people sitting inside, drinking coffee and chatting peacefully, while the strains of a live jazz quartet waft to you on the breeze.

Obvious exits: hall, Seminar2, Seminar1, seminar3, Seminar4, VC Project Room, and cafe

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Ground Floor Hall
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You are standing in the hall. Off the hall are three doors, one leading to Tiger's Office, one leading to GeeGee's Office and a third
leading to the Visiting Research Fellow's Office. At the north end of the hall is a courtyard. The seminar rooms open off this courtyard.

Obvious exits: foyer, Courtyard, Tiger's Office, upstairs, GeeGee's Office, and Visiting Research Fellow

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RMIT Tokyo Building

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You have entered the foyer of the RMIT Tokyo Building. Around the walls you see pictures of alumni. You recognise some famous faces. To your right is a noticeboard. Type LOOK NOTICEBOARD to see what is on it.

You see Noticeboard.

You see foxy_dance (Asleep) standing about.

Obvious exits: out and hall

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