# Effective Use of VLEs: Computer−Mediated Conferencing

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# Features of CMC

Getting to know your local VLE resources through use, practicing with colleagues and engaging in familiarisation sessions with students before using communication tools 'for real' in the support of learning, makes enormous sense. Some 'warm−up' activities are suggested in the 'getting used to it' section. Meantime it is worth flagging four key features of CMC support of teaching and learning, each with its own positive, negative or problematic aspects, to think about in the context of your own course development:

- the asynchronous nature of any exchange
- the text−based form of the individual contributions
- the potential permanence of the resulting record
- the facility to impose specific topic headings to structure discussion.

## Asynchronicity

The exchange involves participants contributing 'turns' to the debate at different times and often from very different places. This has implications for the pace and rhythm of the communication. Whilst it gives opportunity for composition and reflection on response to another's contribution, it can impede the sort of spontaneity that might be desirable in an exchange of ideas. The time spent crafting a response can seem wasted when, on re−entering the discourse, further messages have appeared either refuting or developing the idea, perhaps even using your own intended content ideas.

This experience in itself, however, can be positive if it supports a more equitable exchange of developing information and drafts, acknowledging similarity of ideas as a feature rather than feeling it to be a bug. Interaction can then take these forward, through argument and development.

## Text as a communication medium

Discussing an issue through the exclusive medium of text brings authoring demands that are different to those experienced by speakers in an oral debate. For many novices, using the written word to sustain a discussion is an unusual experience. Course participants may bring varying expectations of how to manage their learning communications in this way.

In particular, the lack of 'non verbal' cues such as intonation, expression, gesture etc may prove demanding for inexperienced users. It may be difficult to mend misunderstandings that arise from using written language carelessly. To some extent self−correction becomes automatic as people gain more experience with the medium but some of your students may need warning about the effort needed to communicate conversationally, and appropriately, in text.
See http://www.windweaver.com/internet.com for more information.

Experience is the best tutor, as a group learns to find its own common language(s) for development and crafting of ideas, as well as (if required) formally presenting them for peer review.

## Permanence of the communication record

What is written down (as opposed to spoken) is more readily preserved and made to seem permanent. The computer−based archive that defines a text conference can be visited and revisited, by members of the learning group, 'privileged outsiders' or, in the case of an open forum, anyone with access to the online address.

This can clearly be an advantage, both for revision and for 'vicarious learning'. Your students can review and develop their own and their colleagues' learning, as well as using the archive as a

reference resource. Interesting options for 'crafting' an archive for such use are possible.

However, if editing permissions are not held by the whole participant group, then this 'fixing' and lasting accessibility of messages can be unwelcome to some participants. In particular, it may cultivate feelings of self−consciousness or vulnerability, and impede communication by some of your students.

## Communicative structures

Finally, most text conferencing technologies invite an explicit structuring of texts or discussion threads, by use of headings and a 'reply−to' facility. Such organisational structure is less typical of much informal spoken discussion and debate. Your students may feel constrained by such discipline and yet without it may not actually be able to allow useful structure to emerge. 'I am not sure whether to post this here, in the cafe, or in the plenary' is becoming a common phrase among online learners!

You may find it useful to agree and set some ground rules for interaction, and familiarise your students with the functions and the value of retaining topic headings for theme interaction, 'cafe' areas for social exchange, 'plenary' areas for cross−group course communication etc. Most VLE resources support this variety; the degree of 'fit for purpose' uptake will differ between your different groups of students.

# Advantages and Disadvantages

You might like to return to this (non−inclusive) listing of advantages and disadvantages of CMC for reflection, after familiarising yourself with the CMC tools available to you.

## Advantages

- time and place independence
- no need to travel to the place of learning
- time lapse between messages allows for reflection
- speakers of other languages have added time to read and compose answers
- questions can be asked without waiting for a 'turn'
- it allows all students to have a voice without the need to fight for 'airtime', as in a face−to−face situation
- the lack of visual cues provides participants with a more equal footing
- many to many interaction may enhance peer learning
- answers to questions can be seen by all − and discussed.
- discussion is potentially richer than in a face−to−face classroom setting
- messages are archived centrally providing a database of interactions which can be revisited
- the process of learning becomes more visible to learners and tutors.

## Disadvantages

- communication takes place via written messages so learners with poor writing skills may be at a disadvantage
- paralinguistic cues (facial expression, intonation, gesture, body orientation) as to a speaker's intention are not available, except through combinations of keystrokes (emoticons) or the use of typeface emphasis (italics, bold, capital letters)
- time gaps within exchanges may affect the pace and rhythm of communications leading to a possible loss in textual coherence
- the medium is socially opaque; participants may not know who or how many people they may be addressing

- the normal repair strategies of face−to−face communication are not available and misunderstandings may be harder to overcome
- context and reference of messages may be unclear and misunderstandings may occur
- loss of spontaneity and quick−thinking and response type of debate / discussion.