## To Blend or Not to Blend? Synchronous and Asynchronous Teaching Perspectives in Online Marketing Education

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#### Abstract

With the rapid expansion in online marketing education it is important that optimum teaching delivery methods are used. Ongoing debate surrounds the use of live chats versus discussion threads for online activities. This paper focuses on both these synchronous and asynchronous online tutorial delivery formats from both student and staff, as well as the online learning management system perspectives. Different interactive student behaviour within the unit's learning site is observed depending on the tutorial delivery format used. Clear preferences, advantages and limitations are observed amongst both staff and students. Implications for the delivery of online marketing units are discussed.

Keywords: Online chat, discussion thread, synchronous, asynchronous, online education

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#### Introduction

Online education in Australia is undergoing rapid expansion as TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and university institutions capitalise on the growing demand for online courses. As illustration Open Universities Australia (OUA) enrolments are up from around 25,000 in 2004 to over 117,000 in 2010 (OUA 2010). With this expansion ICT (information and communication technology) and the online teaching delivery format have become major considerations with regard to long term sustainability of tertiary institutions. Not surprisingly these aspects are the focus of considerable education research. Eastman and Swift (2001) claim that quality online education comes from the content, design and preparation, rather than the delivery technology. While others argue that when education is provided via the internet it is technology that plays a major role (Abernathy 1999; Benbunan-Fich 1999). More recent intermediaries in this debate such as Nonis, Hudson and Hunt (2010) acknowledge that "*The instructor, the student, and the technology have to work in unison so that the experience for the student is seamless. If not, the experience for the student will suffer.*" This paper focuses on all three aspects examining asynchronous and synchronous online tutorial delivery formats from student and staff, as well as the online learning management system perspectives.

#### Live Chat and Discussion Board Threads

Online live chat sessions (synchronous interaction in real time) and discussion board threads (discussions using asynchronous discussion threads) are popular features available in most learning management systems such as Blackboard. Both have their merits and demerits.

Online chat sessions are similar to face-to-face classes, with students logging in at the same time to participate in real time discussion. Chats are usually structured by the convenor in a way that facilitates learning (Cook 2007). Advantages of online chats have been discussed widely by education researchers, including marketing educators such as Luck and Whiteley-De Graaf (2004) who examined postgraduate student perceptions of online tutorials in Integrated Marketing Communications. Chats are popular since they provide instant responses and feedback between students and teachers. Lee (2005) believes online chats help students improve communication skills and Idris (1993) explains how these online tutorials create opportunity for students, particularly those who are working in isolation, to promote more active learning. Brown and Duguid (1996) indicate that online tutorials promote an environment where participants readily learn from each other, discover that others share common problems, and discuss topical issues in depth.

Many researchers agree that online discussion boards also play an important role in online education. Kim and Shaw (2009) conclude that online discussion promotes collaborative problem solving and discovery-oriented activities. Another advantage is its ability to foster student-peer interaction (Rochester and Pradel 2008). According to Lee (2005), use of discussion boards also helps students to learn to respect and appreciate the opinions of other participants. However, the impact of discussion board varied from learner to learner, depending on how students perceived the experience (Lee 2005). Birch and Volkov (2005) found that the use of discussion boards (in one of their undergraduate marketing online units) had allowed students to achieve a range of cognitive and social learning outcomes, and to develop some important graduate skills.

While some online educational researchers recommend blended approaches that utilise the strengths of both delivery formats (e.g., McDonald 2006), there have been fewer investigations specifically

into the marketing education context. Similarly fewer studies still examine these topics from both student and staff perspectives.

Regardless of recommendations in the literature, the propensity for each online tutorial delivery format appears to be guided by convenor preferences and or specific subject traditions. As example, weekly tutorial components for Marketing and IT units in the Swinburne University online Bachelor of Business degree program were predominantly delivered using synchronous delivery, whereas those for other disciplines such as Media relied more upon asynchronous thread formats.

## **Background and Methodology**

Swinburne University's undergraduate Marketing major program is currently taught online for OUA, as well as Kaplan Singapore. Across several study periods marketing teaching staff experimented with various online tutorial delivery formats ranging from exclusive live chat, to exclusive discussion threads, as well as a blend of the two. Staff and student feedback, as well as data on how students interact with the Blackboard learning site have been collected and examined. More specifically the three research components are:

- 1. Blackboard's unit statistics for student interaction were examined for six subjects taught using different combinations of live chat and or discussion threads for tutorials.
- 2. Students from five Marketing units were asked via Blackboard, as well as during a face to face session for a Kaplan unit, to provide feedback with regard to online tutorial delivery preference, as well as specific likes and dislikes associated with each approach.
- 3. OUA lecturers at Swinburne were asked to provide their likes and dislikes of the tutorial delivery formats via email, as well as during the course of face to face discussion.

#### Results

#### **Blackboard Statistics**

Table 1 presents Blackboard statistics for student interaction (hits) by tutorial delivery method for six Marketing related units selected to include a variety of online tutorial delivery modes. While the statistics represent only a small sample of units, the results are logical and appear to suggest that student interaction with the Blackboard unit learning sites increases according to the level of discussion thread (as opposed to live chat) activity. Interestingly this is evident not just in the interactive folders where live chat and thread interaction is recorded, but for the total overall interaction with Blackboard. In other words there is a greater level of interaction with Blackboard (see table's last column) when more thread intensive activities are used.

Online unit (OUA &	Chat main (minimal	Chat & thread	Thread only	Total student hits in interactive Blackboard	Total students	Mean hits per student interactive	Total student Blackboard	Mean hits per student
Kaplan)	thread)			folders*		folders*	hits overall	overall
MAR210 (SP2)	✓			2536	53	49	NA	NA
LBM207k	✓			751	15	50	2197	146
MAR301		$\checkmark$		11823	77	154	20195	262
MAR270		$\checkmark$		12547	81	154	21365	263
MAR210 (SP4)			~	17833	85	210	25589	301
SCI17 **			~	161910	343	472	215377	628

 Table 1 - Blackboard Statistics for Student Interaction by Tutorial Delivery Method

\*Collaboration & Discussion Board Unit Statistics

\*\*SCI17 has a minor assessment component linked to discussion board participation

#### **Chat and Thread Preferences**

51 students out of 225 from five marketing units responded to requests for feedback:

Table 2 - Student Frederice for Tutorial Derivery Method				
Prefer live chat	Prefer discussion thread	No preference		
37% (19)	45% (23)	18% (9)		

# Table 2 - Student Preference for Tutorial Delivery Method

As indicated in Table 2 online tutorial delivery format preference appears strongly divided, with most marketing students clearly favouring one or the other. 'Fence sitters' tended to acknowledge the values of each of the teaching delivery modes. The following comments illustrate these diverse opinions:

"I'm a big fan of online tutes, I definitely prefer live chats." "I need threads. I am unable to join the live chat due to work commitments." "Discussion as it suits my learning style, but live chat is really important too. It's a tough one."

While divided preferences are also found amongst staff delivering online units, it is interesting to note that student preferences did not necessarily match the mode of delivery for the unit surveyed.

#### **Staff Perceptions**

LIVE CHAT

Staff perceptions with regard to likes and dislikes of the different online tutorial delivery formats are presented in Table 3. With the small number of staff that provided feedback (ten) clearly no conclusions can be drawn with regard to overall preferences. However, it is clear that there are strong perceived benefits, as well as disadvantages for each mode.

Table 3 – Staff Perceptions of Tutorial Delivery M	Methods
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ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=17)	LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=24)
<ul> <li>Building relationships (student-student / staff-student)</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Can't type fast enough / respond to all comments in detail /</li> </ul>
5	difficult if too many students at once 5
<ul> <li>Better for explaining &amp; exploring issues &amp; problems /</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Software / technology / accessibility problems / booted out of</li> </ul>
immediate feedback to see if understood 5	chat room 4
<ul> <li>Good for isolated online students who need the social</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Tend to be in the evening 3</li> </ul>
interaction 2	- Sometimes knee jerk reaction and not a considered response 2
<ul> <li>Immediate response / real time 2</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Fixed / time inflexible 2</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Tutor directing discussion 1</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Less predictable so needs competent lecturer / sessional staff</li> </ul>
<ul> <li>Stimulating lively debate 1</li> </ul>	to handle uncertainty 2
<ul> <li>Feels like real teaching 1</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Not as flexible as face to face conversation 1</li> </ul>
	- Unable to tidy / edit 1
	– Low participation 1
	<ul> <li>Requires students to stick to rules of engagement 1</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Requires greater prior planning than threads 1</li> </ul>
	- Some transcript conversation irrelevant l
DISCUSSION THREADS	– Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29)	– Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1  LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29) - More time for tutor reflection / composing response /	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant I</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)</li> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting /</li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29) - More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)</li> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29) - More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7 - Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29) - More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7 - Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5 - More time for students to prepare / source answers 4	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial 2</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29) - More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7 - Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5 - More time for students to prepare / source answers 4 - Flexibility / staff can catch up any time 3	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial 2</li> <li>Shallow student input 1</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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DISCUSSION THREADS         ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29)         -       More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7         -       Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5         -       More time for students to prepare / source answers 4         -       Flexibility / staff can catch up any time 3         -       Good for student connections / peer interaction 3         -       Flexibility / students can join / catch up any time 2         -       Students can discuss first and post considered response as a group 1         -       More frequent tutor input 1	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial 2</li> <li>Shallow student input 1</li> <li>Students responses sometimes too long 1</li> <li>Sometimes threads difficult to understand 1</li> <li>Impersonal 1</li> <li>Time lag 1</li> <li>Hard to keep up with larger units 1</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS         ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29)         -       More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7         -       Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5         -       More time for students to prepare / source answers 4         -       Flexibility / staff can catch up any time 3         -       Good for student connections / peer interaction 3         -       Flexibility / students can join / catch up any time 2         -       Students can discuss first and post considered response as a group 1         -       More frequent tutor input 1         -       Input / debate evolves 1	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial 2</li> <li>Shallow student input 1</li> <li>Students responses sometimes too long 1</li> <li>Sometimes threads difficult to understand 1</li> <li>Impersonal 1</li> <li>Time lag 1</li> <li>Conflict between students can arise quickly as the tutor is not</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
DISCUSSION THREADS         ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=29)         -       More time for tutor reflection / composing response / can find out answer 7         -       Greater participation / more students / more inclusive 5         -       More time for students to prepare / source answers 4         -       Flexibility / staff can catch up any time 3         -       Good for student connections / peer interaction 3         -       Flexibility / students can join / catch up any time 2         -       Students can discuss first and post considered response as a group 1         -       More frequent tutor input 1         -       Input / debate evolves 1         -       Greater scope for depth / detail 1	<ul> <li>Some transcript conversation irrelevant 1</li> <li>LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=12)         <ul> <li>Low participation / not everyone likes to be seen posting / some opt out 3</li> <li>Discussions don't close / keep on for weeks after the tutorial 2</li> <li>Shallow student input 1</li> <li>Students responses sometimes too long 1</li> <li>Sometimes threads difficult to understand 1</li> <li>Impersonal 1</li> <li>Time lag 1</li> <li>Hard to keep up with larger units 1</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### **Student Perceptions**

As with the staff feedback, perceptions from the 51 students regarding the different online tutorial delivery formats were also analysed using content analysis. Findings are presented in Tables 4 and 5. Variation in the frequency of the likes and dislikes expressed about the different methods also appear to support an overall preference for the discussion thread format. However, unique benefits or strengths, as well as particular limitations are identified for each approach.

CHAT ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=97)	CHAT LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=93)
1. SYNCHRONOUS 43% (42) Immediate response / feedback 29 Greater interaction with tutor and students in real time 4 Sharing / generating thoughts and ideas 3 Can clarify questions as they arise 3 Don't have to keep going back and forth for clarification 2 Helpful hints / direction from tutor 1	4. SYNCHRONOUS 12% (11) Too brief / small window to participate 6 Not enough time to think / develop ideas 3 Can't continue conversation once session ends 1 Questions not always solved 1
2. MEDIUM 29% (28) More interactive medium 9 Good for group discussion / brainstorming 8 More depth / detailed discussion 4 Easy to access / user friendly / simple 4 Easy to ask question / clarify question / issues 3	1. MEDIUM 30% (28) Too many questions at once / themes blurred / confused / can't get a word in 14 Logging in / accessing the chat (software / connection) 6 Can't type quickly enough / only short responses 4 Waste time on introductions / others joining late 2 Jargon / shorthand /not English 1 Less input from tutor 1
<b>3. SOCIAL 9%</b> (9) Builds rapport with tutor and students 4 Fun, entertaining/lively, engaging 4 Good for identifying potential group members 1	6. SOCIAL 3% (3) Too much irrelevant chat 2 No privacy / prefer to email tutor 1
4. CONVENIENCE 7% (7) Scheduled task over & done with / cover a topic each week / less time consuming 7	1. CONVENIENCE 30% (28) Fixed time / can't always attend (commitments, tired) 16 Have to organise schedule around the fixed chat time/ can't work around interruptions 12
5. INVOLVEMENT / PARTICIPATION 6% (6) Clear advantage for students who participate 3 Can gain a lot / contribute regardless of preparation 1 Encourages involvement of quieter students 1 More participation 1	5. INVOLVEMENT/PARTICIPATION 10% (9) Low participation/ does not involve everyone 7 Disadvantaged if unable to participate 2
6. TRANSCRIPTS 5% (5) Entertaining to read 3 Clear record of discussion 2	3. TRANSCRIPTS 15% (14) Transcript / recording no structure / confusing / disorganised 7 Have to search for the answers 2 Sometimes difficult to grasp the context / meaning 2 Live chat transcript sometimes does not always record 2 Not as detailed as threads 1

## Table 4 – Student Perceptions of Live Chat Tutorials

#### **Conclusion and Future Research**

While the sample is relatively small the results indicate that the level of Blackboard interaction varies significantly depending on the online tutorial delivery format used. Student interaction is highest for discussion threads, which suggests that including at least some regular thread activities will increase the level of learning site use. Overall, students appear prefer the thread format for online tutorials. However, opinion is divided and a substantial proportion of students also prefer live chat. Given the varied strengths and limitations identified for chats and threads by both students and staff, a blended approach may provide optimum learning and teaching opportunities, as well as keeping everyone happy. For example, weekly thread activities in conjunction with assessment focused live chat prior to deadlines is a logical combination capitalising on the strengths of each. Since staff also appear to have clear preferences regarding the delivery formats such blended formats may not always be used. Regardless, if convenors are at least aware of the strengths and limitations of their chosen approach they can design their activities accordingly, as well as

effectively manage student expectations in this regard. The findings presented are exploratory in nature and it may therefore be relevant to further substantiate these in a larger quantitative study.

Table 5 – Student Terceptions	of Discussion Thread Tutorials
THREAD ADVANTAGES / LIKES (n=89)	THREAD LIMITATIONS / DISLIKES (n=52)
1. CONVENIENCE 28% (25) Flexibility / access at own convenience / no timing issues 21 Topic remains open for discussion for a longer period / can still participate when you like 4	6. CONVENIENCE 6% (3) Topics drag on for more than one week 2 May not have the discipline to view regularly 1
2. THREADS 22% (20) Easy to search for answers / questions / structured threads / get required information 8 More detail than chat transcripts / unlimited debate 3 Enjoyable reading what people come up with 2 Useful revision resource 2 Less repetition compared to chat transcripts 2 One discussion at a time 1 More one on one feedback 1 Understanding theory / concepts / arguments 1	2. THREADS 15% (8) Unable to edit / revise once posted / messy threads 3 Confusing / too many threads get posted 2 Greater volume of material to read 1 Have to read from the beginning 1 Not print friendly 1
3. MEDIUM 19% (17) Easy to access / user friendly / simple to post 5 Good discussion medium 3 Sharing / generating thoughts and ideas 3 Incremental learning / ideas develop 3 Helpful hints / direction / timely feedback from tutor 2 Keep students on track / up to date with the unit 1	4. MEDIUM 12% (6) Endless threads if can't understand an issue 2 Miscommunication / easy to misunderstand 2 Can't always access system (software/ connection) 1 Not easy to print out 1
4. ASYNCHRONOUS 12% (11) More time to reflect / consider replies 4 Students able to post longer / considered threads 3 Tutors have time to give more detail 2 Can read up, research and develop input 2	1. ASYNCHRONOUS 44% (23) Longer response time / delay in process / wait for feedback / slow or no response 22 Waste time checking when no response posted 1
5. INVOLVEMENT / PARTICIPATION 11% (10) Prompt, timely tutor response / regular posts & updates 6 High participation/ involves everyone 4	4. INVOLVEMENT / PARTICIPATION 12% (6) Not as much student-student & student-staff interaction 3 Less committed students benefit 1 Low participation / only tutor responds 1 Overall takes more time each week 1
<ul> <li>6. SOCIAL 7% (6)         <ul> <li>Facilitates interaction amongst tutor and students 2</li> <li>Can see class mates posts / questions 2</li> <li>Fun, entertaining, enjoyable 1</li> <li>Good for identifying potential group members 1</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	3. SOCIAL 14% (7) No privacy / rather email tutor / shy 4 Boring, not live 2 No group chat 1

## Table 5 – Student Perceptions of Discussion Thread Tutorials

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