In 2006 Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) launched a large scale e-communication project involving six universities from the UK & US (for details of previous pilot see Jones et al 2005). MMU is the lead partner and in the 2007 International E-communication Exchange (IEE) the other participating universities included the University of West Florida (UWF), the University of Brighton (UB), the University of Westminster (UW), the University of North Carolina Wilmington (NCW) and California State University Fresno (CSUF). Students on the IEE were studying similar degree programmes, with a core focus on the criminal justice system, its organisational components and processes and its legal and public policy contexts. The IEE lasted seven weeks and was delivered between February and the middle of March 2007 to take advantage of the correlation of semester dates across all participating universities.

The aims of the IEE are fourfold:

- to change modes of student communication (individual and group);
- to extend communication across cultural and national borders;
- to develop students’ potential to think across cultural and national borders;
- to develop students’ information and communication technology (ICT) mediated interactional skills.

An evaluation of the previous 2006 IEE was supported by a grant from the Higher Education academy subject centre for sociology, anthropology and politics (C-SAP) and was based on data from the WebCT site, focus groups conducted at each UK university, the message board discussions of all students (UK and US) and a post-project questionnaire of all participating students.

### Student communication

There is a clear relationship between writing and the construction of meaning (Cowan and Crème, 2007) and yet students rarely get the opportunity to exercise their writing skills in an ongoing manner. Writing outside the traditional essay format, the IEE required students to write frequently and informally, thereby capturing “thinking in flight” (ibid: 101). Students were also required to read the messages posted by other students, giving them the opportunity to be reflective readers of each others’ work. Furthermore, students were reading and writing for a dual purpose: they were managing the competing demands of working towards an assessment and also responding to their fellow group members. To succeed individually they had to collaborate.

In 2007 a total of 528 students from 6 universities (3 in UK and 3 in US) were registered for the exchange. The largest cohort was from Brighton (157) and the smallest was from CSUF (55). Eleven students withdrew before the start of the IEE and a further 26 did not participate once the project started (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Number of non-participating students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MMU</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UB</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>UW</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCW</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>CSUF</td>
<td>2</td>
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Table 1 - Non-participating students by institution

Students were allocated to small discussion groups (average of ten students per group) and were required to discuss a specific topic over a two-week period. This process was repeated twice more over the course of six weeks. Using the tracking functionality of WebCT it was evident some students who did not post messages were reading postings from other students and accessing the resource materials, so it could be argued that they were having some form of (limited) learning experience.

Just as any new learning cohort needs time to get to know each other, the IEE was structured to include ‘buddy time’. The ‘Student Coffee Bar’ area of the message board was open to all students and aimed to achieve the following:

- Practice in posting messages, reading messages and replying to messages
- Recognition of the importance of using clear subject headings and the need to thread messages
- Beginning to share information about a topic and respond to each other’s messages

These activities were designed to enable students to engage in interactive thinking and collaborative discussion and not just to post individual ideas. This period aimed to familiarise students with the use of message boards to prepare them...
for their assessed ‘topic discussions’. We were not completely successful in this aim. A survey of participating academics revealed a need for further instruction on using threaded message boards:

"I see that despite my initial message in the Student Coffee Room, they are typically entitling their messages with 'hello', 'hi' and 'Hey - oh well, I warned them!" - Academic A

The most frequent comment made by students was how they valued being able to discuss issues with students in other geographical locations. However, students in the US stated that they were concerned that "the British students will be more intelligent and articulate than us". Typically, this was also a concern from the UK students "I’m worried that I won’t be able to keep up with the US students". It was important that all students felt fully supported throughout their participation in the IEE.

The WebCT site provided not only a space for the discussions but also a repository of supporting materials, self-tests and other relevant material including a FAQ list to which students could contribute (see Figure 1). The discussion topics were selected to be of interest to students in the UK and the US. The first and third topics were constructed to be controversial whilst the second topic was less controversial but instead aimed to draw out students understanding that each location has a great deal in common in relation to criminal justice issues.

Discussion Topic One - Does strict gun control mean less crime?
Discussion Topic Two - What is the role of the victim in the criminal justice system?
Discussion Topic Three - Does the death penalty have a place in the 21st century?

These discussion topics were supported by a range of appropriate resources which aimed to draw out any pertinent differences and similarities between the UK and the US.

The disciplinary relevance of the discussion topics encouraged student engagement and proved to be an innovative medium to help students who were less confident engage with other group members in a reflective manner and at their own pace.

Managing participation in different time zones was less taxing than first imagined and students coped well with the asynchronous nature of discussion boards. Academics should not underestimate the ability of 21st century students in dealing with electronic communication. The use of WebCT to bring students together across different universities represents a significant innovation in learning and teaching within criminology yet it is also transferable to other associated disciplines that hold the pedagogic desire to stimulate critical awareness, analytical thought and reflective practice.

Working across borders

The academics had to be champions of the project, selling it to their Heads of Department and academic standards committees. The key co-ordinator had to be hard working as 6,252 messages were generated during the 6 week period and students also used the system to pose questions and expected a quick answer. This new form of delivery and assessment needed clear mechanisms of support for the students and for participating staff. Discussing and designing the project with partners who were not ‘down the corridor’ meant that academics also had to model the expectations we had of students to work across borders.

We had to agree a set of generic materials including assessment criteria and a student handbook which all participating staff could customise to suit their own needs. Students were inducted in computer labs in their own universities and had ongoing support in classrooms. In each geographical location lectures and seminars were used to support the topics of the project and the WebCT area was used as a repository for relevant materials and web-links. A ‘showcase’ of exemplar messages was constructed and this seemed to have the effect of ‘raising the standard’.
The crucial factor was trust. As academics we placed an enormous amount of trust in the project’s ability to deliver its goals, for us to work together in the virtual environment of WebCT and the students trusted our ability to make the project a success.

### Students’ ICT mediated interactional skills

One of the key challenges to the project was in deciding when and how to intervene in student groups. The academic staff had agreed a policy of minimal intervention, not least to avoid ‘tutor overload’ (Fox and MacKeogh, 2003). However, most staff felt the need to intervene on at least a couple of occasions and a constant comment from participating academics was that students were posting messages after the two week period deadline. When the project moves over to WebCT Vista this will no longer be a problem as it will be possible to manage the discussion boards in a more sophisticated manner than was possible under WebCT Campus.

Not all students managed to post the required two messages per week. Posting two messages per week does not sound difficult but many students commented that it was like having to write a mini essay and that felt they were representing their university (and country). When you estimate a minimum of two messages per week of 300 words per message over a six week period the project requires students to write 3,600 words, read many more and then finish with a 1,000 word reflective report: it is not an easy assignment.

There were 50 individual discussion groups with an average membership of 10 students each. An average group posted 95 messages during the six weeks but there was wide variation from Group 48 who posted just 62 messages, to Group 10 who collectively posted 179 messages.

Analysis of the project suggests that students can be categorised as:

- **Early Responders** – these students tended to post early, often being the first and, on occasion, without thinking their point through or without conducting any supportive reading;

- **Reflective Responders** – these students did not rush to post at the first opportunity but carried out background reading and developed their thoughts, posting only when ready. These students often refined their original position in subsequent postings and referenced evidence to support their position;

- **Smash and Grab Responders** – these were students who had read earlier responses, picked up on useful citations and strong arguments and came in late to make postings that on surface looked good but did not add a lot to the group discussion.

It is not news to suggest that teaching strategies which focus on delivery outside of the classroom are breaking the “physical link between campus and student” (Hirsch, 2001) but we must ensure that in this process students do not lose the valuable relationships they have with each other and their tutors. The 2007 IEE ended with a conference in the Geoffrey Manton building. The event at Manchester Metropolitan University was opened by Professor Janet Beer, Dean and Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Humanities, Law and Social Sciences. Other speakers included Helen Howard of C-SAP, Dr Paula Wilcox, Principal Lecturer Brighton University; Maggie Sumner, Head of the Sociology Department Westminster University, Dr Julie Kunselman and Dr Kathy Johnson of the University of West Florida and student representatives of all UK partner institutions. Everyone who attended agreed that the students provided the most interesting sessions of the day.

The ability of this project to internationalise the curriculum and encourage students to think beyond their own geographical location is of crucial importance. In 2008 the IEE will welcome two further institutions, one from Scotland and one from the Netherlands.

Thinking creatively about how technology is used to enhance the student experience is the crucial point. E-communication projects can provide such enhancement to the student experience. Collaboration across institutions is not easy but can be tremendously rewarding for all concerned. The last word should go to the students:

- “Informative, enjoyable, educational, controversial and contemporary are all words that could be used to describe the e-communication project.” (Student D)

- “a very enjoyable and different experience for learning ... I would definitely like to take part again in something similar to the E-communication project.” (Student E)

### References


