

Editorial: E-learning together

For many years, the value of learning in groups has been widely recognised. The introduction of computers into schools and colleges further stimulated this trend but often for reasons of limited resources rather than to meet planned pedagogical goals.

. . . while pupils frequently work with computers in groups, the purpose is usually to maximise access to a limited number of terminals. Hence, the potential of groupwork is rarely exploited and collaborative learning in such groups happens more by chance than design. (Eraut & Hoyles, 1989)

As a result of earlier work, a well balanced note of warning was sounded:

Nobody should suppose on the basis of (existing) studies that truly collaborative work is going to provide a panacea for education. . . . However, it seems likely that a better understanding of the mechanisms at work in such interactions may make it possible to improve significantly upon this aspect of educational practice and the potential benefits are considerable. (Light & Glachan, 1985)

However, in this issue of *JCAL*, Chiu reports on a detailed study which failed to demonstrate the value of learning in teams when compared to individual learning. It still seems that there is much to be learnt about working in groups even when the members are in face-to-face contact.

These studies of the 1970s and 80's were based on standalone terminals or computers as the technology for communication at a distance was not sufficiently established or reliable. For this reason, distance learning organisations were unable to make early use of the new technologies. The extent to which the situation has changed is well illustrated by the review of European open and distance learning projects by Hodgson in this issue of *JCAL*. The community dimension of sharing and creating knowledge is a major incentive in such work.

This relatively new opportunity for group learning has now taken on increased importance and opens up a wide range of research issues which include:

- peer assessment requiring careful consideration as the competitive element present in current assessment is questioned (Lin *et al.*, 2001);
- assessment of both group products and the contribution of individuals leads to the need to analyse group interaction, now visible through email and conference exchanges (Chen *et al.*, 2001);
- the nature and value of feedback given to a group (Buchanan, 2000) and incomplete feedback as a stimulus to learners' involvement (Crook, 2002)

References

- Buchanan, T. (2000) The efficacy of a World-wide Web mediated formative assessment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **16**, 3, 193–200.
- Chen, G.D., Ou, K.L., Liu, C.C. & Liu, B.J. (2001) Intervention and strategy analysis for web group-learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **17**, 1, 58–71.
- Crook, C. (2002) Deferring to resources: collaborations around traditional vs. computer-based notes. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **18**, 1, 64–76.
- Eraut, M. & Hoyles, C. (1989) Groupwork with computers. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **5**, 1, 12–24.
- Light, P. & Glachan, M. (1985) Facilitation of Individual Problem Solving through Peer Interaction. *Educational Psychology*, **5**, 3&4, 217–225.
- Lin, S.S.J., Liu, E.Z.F. & Yuan, S.M. (2001) Web-based peer assessment: feedback for students with various thinking styles. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, **17**, 4, 420–432.