Experiencing a New Paradigm - Elements, Aspects, and Structure of Selected Courses in the MDE Program

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This article begins with a brief description of the author's background as a participant in the MDE[1] and the nature of work and experiences, which have provided her with additional insight and understanding to reflect on selected courses in the program[2]. It goes on to provide an overview of the various elements, aspects, structures of tools and spaces implemented in the selected courses and analyzes conference features, participation, study groups, assignments and feedback. Trends and approaches are described, observations and thoughts on arising issues are discussed, and suggestions for improvement are made. That continuous evaluation and development, as practiced in these courses and in this program, are important, is the key conclusion.

1. Introduction

The impressions and information in this exposition are based on the intertwining of various roles of this author in the MDE program. The primary and foremost perspective reflects the background as one of the first fifty students starting the program in January 2000 in which several of the described courses were experienced in their pioneer stages. Over the two years that have passed these courses have been continuously developed and refined. Since the spring semester 2001 this author has assisted in the OMDE 624 *Student Support in Distance Education* course (now OMDE 608 and a core course) and in September 2001 was also charged with several tasks regarding courses originating from the University of Oldenburg[3] (OMDE 601). At a faculty meeting in Oldenburg in January 2002, where program directors, instructors, and Oldenburg's instructional designer were present, the author presented an evaluation of OMDE 601. At this meeting course syllabi, required readings, and assignments of the courses described in this essay were introduced and made available to those present, and experiences in the program were exchanged. The presentations in this essay reflect these various settings.

2. Background

The programs history and other elements included in this analysis are described in more detail in other contributions to this monograph[4]. Being a 'pioneer' student for most of the program was an exiting and interesting experience. It offered hands-on involvement as a distance learner and insight into many of the managerial issues of a new and challenging program. The courses were carefully developed and designed with experts in the field of distance education prior to the start of the program. However, the constraints encountered were considerable. To develop a masters program in this field and in the online environment, which is still fairly new even in distance education, provided several

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[1] MDE: Master of Distance Education

[2] Courses are: 601: Foundations of DE; 602: DE Systems; 603: Technology in DE; 604: Management of DE; 605: New and Emerging Media; 606: Economics of DE; 607: Instructional Design and Course Development in DE; 624: Student Support in DE. For details see: http://www.umuc.edu/mde/

[3] Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany - UMUC's partner institution in the program.

[4] Cf. Bernath/Rubin in this volume.

challenges. There were no standards for the content and delivery of such a program (e.g. when compared to the much longer tradition of MBA's) and there are/were few existing examples. Competencies, expertise, readily available content, readings, and available experts are/were scarce and needed to be sought out on a point to point basis. Pilot phases could not be conducted due to the quick launch of the program and its first courses with their successful start. The first students – the pioneers - were exposed to some of the drawbacks of these circumstances and due to their one-time experience are often not aware of the efforts made to improve and further develop the courses. It can be said that in many cases students' suggestions and the common experiences in a course led to a number of changes and adaptations that improved following courses. These circumstances and this approach most likely depict the reality of these future distance education managers in a dynamic and evolving environment.

Other significant elements with regard to the MDE program context deserve mention. Admission requires the equivalent of a U.S. undergraduate degree; non-native English speakers must complete the TOEFL[5], but GMAT[6] and GRE[7] are not required. An open policy is followed by allowing provisional status during three graduate courses, thus providing more open access in other terms than only time and space.

WebTycho is the graduate school's educational portal and 'home' for the MDE program. This platform organizes and structures all courses in the same manner and provides a uniform appearance. It allows some degree of individuality for instructors while guaranteeing familiarity for the students. Support is provided 24/7 via email, telephone, and in form of online tutorials and guides. The interface also provides direct links to the UMUC library, a list of classes the participant is registered for, and a WebTycho 'help' feature.

3. Elements, Aspects and Structure of Spaces

3. 1. Collaborative Learning in the MDE Program

The courses have evolved and been modified over time, based on changes (or extension) of the faculty base, the WebTycho learning environment, experiences with and feedback from students, and practice and practicality. The time point of the author's participation[8], the documentation provided at the 2002 faculty meeting and the author's work related experiences in OMDE 601 & 624 form the basis for a comparative analysis.

The MDE program places a great deal of emphasis on collaborative and co-operative learning and the methods are grounded in a constructivist approach. A wide variety of learning theories, procedures, formats, and styles are exemplified. "One of the key elements of the constructivist approach to learning is the interdependence of the learners on each other in discussing, examining, interpreting and organizing information and experiences, as they are transferred into personal knowledge" (Sharan & Sharan 1992, as cited by Ewing, 2000, para. 22). This is particularly demonstrated in the conference areas, participation requirements, study groups, assignments and feedback. These diverse

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[5] TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language
[6] GMAT: Graduate Management Admission Test
[7] GRE: Graduate Records Examination
[8] Semester and year are provided in parentheses in the table.

elements and methods (as encountered during the author's participation in the courses) are displayed in the following overview. It is very likely that in several courses and areas the nature of these elements has been adapted and/or modified.

Overview of Elements in the MDE Courses:

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
PreWeek & Café/Bar								
Available	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Instructor participation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Structure								
Lessons				✓				
Modules	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Units								✓
Visiting experts	✓	✓	✓			✓		
Conferences								
Study questions (a)	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Participation is part of the grade		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Extent of instructor/ student interaction (b)	b:2	b:2	1	b:2 & c)	b:3	b:2	b:2	b:1
Generalized summaries of contributions	✓			✓ c)	✓	✓		
Participation								
Required and part of grade		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Study Groups								
Monitoring of study groups	✓			c)	✓	✓	d)	✓
Students choose groups		✓	✓					
Group work graded		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Provide work to the class	✓							✓
Assignments								
Some choice in assignments topics	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Advance information on assignment process and content in the syllabus	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Provide work to the class	✓	✓		✓ c)			✓	
Extent of individual assignment feedback	b: 3	b:2	b:1	b:3	b:3	b:2	b:2	b:1

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Feedback								
To students' individual conference contributions	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Generalized feedback on assignments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Use of additional elements								
Telephone conferences			✓	✓				
Chat								✓
Video/audio clips			✓					
Other (Powerpoint, Excel, CBT etc.)					✓	✓		
Provision of online materials	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

a) Study Questions reflects the idea of guiding questions on issues related to readings, introduced by the instructor(s) and made available at the beginning of a new lesson/module/unit.

b) This rough scale depicts the author's perception: 1: extensive (regarding various aspects such as grammar, APA style, approach, use of literature and depth and broadness of scope and/or use of a criteria scale; 2) one or two of the previously mentioned aspects; 3) only a short remark or comment.

c) This course uses a co-teaching model; the nature of instructor activity differed greatly.

d) In this course study groups were installed to proofread and give feedback on each members individual project.

Berge (1995) describes four categories of roles when instructors facilitate learning in the online environment:

- *Pedagogical*, which is intellectual and task related,
- *Social*, which means creating a friendly, social environment,
- *Managerial*, which includes organizational, procedural and administrative tasks,
- *Technical*, which makes participants comfortable with the system (p. 24).

These roles and associated activities build the basis from which the following elements, aspects, and structures in the courses will be reflected upon.

3.1.1. Conference Areas

The conference areas are the backbone of the virtual classrooms in this program. They are the space where communication, participation, exchange, and the learning processes take place and are prominently visible [9]. All courses use this space extensively. Berge (1995) notes that " ... there are essentially two kinds of interaction with regard to learning. One is a student individually interacting with content. The other is a social activity: a student interacting with others about this content." (p. 22).

The MDE courses all 'open' one week prior to the official semester. This provides the students with ample time to become (re)acquainted with the technological features (and

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[9] Cf. Hülsmann "Texts that talk back - Asynchronous conferencing: A possible form of academic discourse?" in this volume discusses the various aspects of asynchronous conferencing.

changes) involved in the virtual environment and each course's particular requirements and setup. A 'PreWeek' conference is available to facilitate this process, thus accommodating the needs of an anonymous and heterogeneous student population. Elements can include updates and new features in the WebTycho learning environment, set-up of the course structure, practice features, exercises, conventions, how to order the required textbooks, and a space to place biographical information or comments[10]. Employing this strategy is supported by research and depicts a form of scaffolding, which Bonk and Kim (1998) describe as " ... a teaching method that provides the learner with support or assistance to complete a task or solve a problem that would not have been mastered without help" (as cited in Ge, Yamashiro & Lee, 2000, para. 3). The extent of activities and details provided in the Pre-Week orientation varies. As more and more generic information is being designed for the program the trend towards a more homogenous approach in this area is emerging.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
PreWeek & Café/Bar								
Available	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Instructor participation	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓

A community space generally unrelated to the subject matter is a Café or Bar and provided in all courses. These areas are established to expedite a sense of community and provide room for the discussion of non-subject related topics (information on events, happenings, new literature, reports and current events, where concerns, absences, and questions are posted) in an amiable, friendly environment. By providing this space the actual content areas (conferences and threads) are less likely to become cluttered with off-topic issues. In most classes instructors monitor and/or take part in the discussions, comment, and/or answer questions.

The main conference areas are structured by the faculty member(s) and are accessible to all rostered in the class. Students contribute by responding to topics and others' responses (asides) and, if given the option, by creating main topics. The conference areas organize the learning experience and take on the form of weekly sequences, modules, or units depending on course design and descriptions in the syllabi.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Structure								
Lessons				✓				
Modules	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Units								✓
Visiting experts	✓	✓	✓			✓		

Most courses use the 'module' covering several weeks in the course. The content details and length of the sequences are provided to different degrees. Modules may be released on a predetermined basis or provided all at once. The content may or may not be described in

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[10]As of the spring semester 2002 WebTycho provides a biography feature in the students' portfolio. The information can be stored and retrieved for future classes.

the syllabus, sometimes the duration of a module is specified in the syllabus. Others not only specify the exact dates of the modules, but provide an overview of content information in a 'lesson guide', in which hyperlinks gives module details.[11] Lessons are generally provided on a weekly basis and thus depict a more structured approach. Units tend to be somewhat longer than modules and group larger content areas.

The instructors' role in this pedagogical environment is not only that of a SME, [12] but of a moderator and facilitator, who exposes threaded topics, opens seminars, announces agendas, asks questions, facilitates discussions, and solves technology issues and emergencies. Davie (1989) mentions several important techniques to manage group discussions that instructors use in the courses: summarizing conversations by drawing together main themes, providing a reference to the original comments made by students, pointing to other materials and comments on the topic or giving ongoing commentary to develop the topic.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Conferences								
Study questions (a)	✔		✔	✔			✔	✔
Participation is part of the grade		✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔
Extent of instructor/ student interaction (b)	b:2	b:2	b:1	b:2 c)	b:3	b:2	b:2	b:1
Generalized summaries of contributions	✔			✔ c)	✔	✔		

a) *Study Questions reflects the idea of guiding questions on issues related to readings, introduced by the instructor(s) and made available at the beginning of a new lesson/module/unit.*

b) *This rough scale depicts the author's perception: 1: extensive (regarding various aspects such as grammar, APA style, approach, use of literature and depth and broadness of scope and/or use of a criteria scale; 2) one or two of the previously mentioned aspects; 3) only a short remark or comment.*

c) *This course uses a co-teaching model; the nature of instructor activity differed greatly. In this course study groups were installed to proofread and give feedback on each members individual project.*

Other important elements are encouragement, showing connections and relationships, mediating between participants and suggesting ways "... the conversation might go deeper, and comment on group processes" (Davie, 1989, p. 81).

Asking specific questions of the students or providing 'study questions' that guide them through the readings and during the discussion in the conference areas are typical strategies in several of the courses. Commenting on each student's responses or accomplished tasks in a lesson, module, or unit generally or responding individually to students' comments both occur. Length and detail of these responses vary not only with regard to the topic or subject within a course, but also from instructor to instructor. Often a number of responses or questions will also be responded to collectively by providing a summary of the discussions and are often enhanced with additional

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[11] Dates may be included if the syllabus is adapted for each semester and not generic.
[12] SME: Subject Matter Expert

information and reading resources. This is an element where the various instructional and educational philosophies are particularly prominent and it allows the learners to become acquainted and deal with a wide array of approaches that often have an immediate affect not only on their learning experiences but their satisfaction as well.

3.1.2. Participation

Participation is closely linked to CMC and the previously described conference areas and is understood as written contributions to the conferences and groups[13]. Eastmond (1992) describes " ... interactivity ... [as] the greatest asset of computer conferencing, often much greater than in the conventional classroom, particularly among learners" (p. 26).

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Participation								
Required and part of grade		✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔

Participation is required in most courses and then constitutes part of the grade. The nature, degree, and facilitation of participation vary widely and encompass a broad scope of arrangements. This includes (but is not limited to) activities such as answering weekly questions (with or without a choice of questions), within a certain time frame (or not), in a particular fashion (or not) or a combination of all. The model, where no prescribed questions are raised and/or students are (only) asked to discuss the readings or make comments, is a further approach. The trend in the program seems to be to not only increasingly 'force' participation through grading, but to attach a higher value to it by increasing its percentage in the overall grade.

One of the instructors' most important roles in this setting is to facilitate this participation. Feenberg (1989) calls this "weaving": "… to summarize the state of the discussion and to find unifying threads in participants comments; it encourages these participants and implicitly prompts them to pursue their ideas" (p. 15).

3.1.3. Study Groups

Introducing study groups allows "... students to experience group interaction as a strategy for learning" (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 131) and Harasim (1996) points out that "... online education shares certain fundamental characteristics with the face-to-face educational environment: interactive group communication …. [where] people can interact with one another in such formats as dyads, seminars, group projects, or role plays, take part in e-lectures, or contact the instructor, tutors, or subject experts all online" (p. 204).

In a number of courses study groups are used and collaboration on assigned tasks is required. The procedure is approached in a number of ways and differences lie in their design. The assigned tasks, the expected outcomes (as individually recognizable parts or one group document), presentation of the work to the class, and policies regarding grading of outcomes and participation are a few of the variables.

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[13] In all courses only asynchronous participation is mandatory; the few courses that offered synchronous modes (such as chat or telephone conferences) were voluntary.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Study Groups								
Monitoring of study groups	✓			c)	✓	✓	d)	✓
Students choose groups		✓	✓					
Group work graded		✓	✓		✓	✓		
Provide work to the class	✓							✓

c) This course uses a co-teaching model; the nature of instructor activity differed greatly.

d) In this course study groups were installed to proofread and give feedback on each members individual project.

Design of study group work areas has changed in several of the courses. Generally two variations occur: in most cases the products are graded with respect to outcomes and in a few cases, participation and process are also considered as part of the grade. In some instances group work is required, but does not immediately affect the grade (this may even vary within the same course). Generally a graded group project is a third or fourth assignment, thus giving the class members the opportunity to become acquainted with one another before joining in a collaborative task. Sometimes (especially if a first task) the instructors propose a group rapporteur or leader.

Study groups are also used as a forum for peer review of students' individual assignments. Participation is not required and the outcomes were neither specified nor assessed. Another approach is used where study group work is required but not graded, whereby the collaborative effort serves as a stepping stone for a next (individual) assignment. This implies participation and provides a 'safe' opportunity to experience and train in virtual teams. In one course study groups are possible, but not mandated. The outcomes are graded based on the decision to work jointly or individually. This approach provides choice and demonstrates a high regard for student autonomy, decision-making, and diversity of learning styles. The task is specified in advance thus providing a structure on which to base ones decision and saves time with regard to content issues. Only one course did not in any way use study groups.

If there was more than one study group task the group stayed in their original constellation throughout the course.[14] The instructors' roles in this environment vary. Generally they do not state their roles in advance, but do monitor the study group's activities and comment, answer questions, or intervene when necessary. It is always possible to contact the instructor for clarification and help either in the study group, in the main conference areas or via email.

3.1.4. Assignments

A large diversity in the courses emerges in the assignment area. There are variations not only within a course, but also between courses, and sections of the same course (if different instructors teach) and many of the courses have been adapted and modified over time.

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[14] Exceptional circumstances occur in small classes where individuals must be reassigned due to an insufficient number of participants in the original group.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Assignments								
Some choice in assignments topics	✔	✔	✔	✔			✔	✔
Advance information on assignment process and content in the syllabus	✔		✔	✔			✔	✔
Provide work to the class	✔	✔		✔ c)			✔	
Extent of individual assignment feedback	b:3	b:2	b:1	b:3	b:3	b:2	b:2	b:1

b) *This rough scale depicts the author's perception: 1: extensive (regarding various aspects such as grammar, APA style, approach, use of literature and depth and broadness of scope and/or use of a criteria scale; 2) one or two of the previously mentioned aspects; 3) only a short remark or comment.*

c) *This course uses a co-teaching model; the nature of instructor activity differed greatly. In this course study groups were installed to proofread and give feedback on each members individual project.*

In several courses a choice in the topic for a particular assignment is possible. Frequently the assignment process and content are provided in the syllabus and specific information with regard to due dates is specified. Personal feedback is almost always provided, if to differing degrees (the observations in the table are based on the author's perceptions and time point of the course and do vary). In some cases general feedback (to the class) on assignments is also given. Grading frameworks or criteria (including attached values) are provided only in a few instances, but development in this area has increased. Several courses offer 'best practice' examples that are posted prior to or after the assignments. Sometimes students are either required or requested to share their individual work with the class. Both approaches exemplify another way of increasing and enhancing the learning experience. In one course students were able to take tests to assess their skills, and immediate the feedback provided yet another form of a learning adventure.

Generally three or four assignments are required in each course and essays are the predominant style. All provide a variety of topics and approaches, including individual or group work and in many cases research beyond the posted reading is necessary or even required. Some courses have stayed with their original assignment design, while others have made more or less significant modifications. The following are examples of some assignment activities:

- writing essays, annotated bibliographies, memos, job advertisements;
- researching and investigating a variety of topics in DE;
- compiling and defining best practice examples, a matrix of characteristics for managerial skills and strengths, a list of crucial contemporary issues, a glossary of terms, descriptions of various aspects of DE;
- analyzing conferences, content, achievement of goals, advantages and disadvantages of elements, tools, instruments in DE, concepts, theories, applications, methods;

- identifying and describing components of systems, elements, strengths and limitations, lessons learned;
- developing project proposals, roll-out plans, case studies, typologies, scenarios, comparisons, indicators, linkages;
- demonstrating and applying mastery in designing a prototype class, choosing appropriate technologies, integrating course materials;
- providing appraisals, rebuttals, classifications, rational for ideas, arguments, standpoints, contexts, modifications, guidelines and requirements in regard to various issues;
- critiquing websites, tools, use of technology, research sources;
- participating in role-plays and analytical exercises;
- keeping a learning journal, calculating costs, drawing graphs, taking a particular position on an issue, supporting arguments;
- assessment and evaluation of activities such as conference threads, and critiquing peers work.

Based on Osborn's and Parnes' work (as cited in Kearsley, 2001) the above-described assignments cover many important aspects that affect the learning process: fact-finding, problem-finding, idea-finding, solution-finding, and acceptance-finding. The assignments incorporate elements from a number of theories such as metacognition, mental models, mastery, attitude change, creativity, and sequencing. They also take into account the various levels and domains of knowledge thus providing diversity and accommodating different learning styles.

3.1.5. Feedback

Feedback is closely related to the above described aspects of conferencing, study groups, participation, and assignments and thus focuses on pedagogical as well as social aspects (Berge, 1995). "In distance education, … research tells us that timely feedback is very important to learning outcomes and to persistence" (J. Brindley, personal communication, April 29, 2002). Feedback can take on several forms: as questions, by providing other perspectives through controversial, opinionated, or debatable statements, and can be addressed to individual students or to a class as a whole. Summarizing and 'weaving' are two forms previously mentioned.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Feedback								
To students' individual conference contributions	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Generalized feedback on assignments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

Brindley (2002) also notes that a particular aspect of feedback is that of interaction with peers, which she describes as "… a very important form of feedback." (Personal communication, April 29, 2002). Tagg (1994) however points out that the function of recognition through the instructor should not be underestimated and generally is more

valued and effective when it comes from the academic staff rather than from students' peers. Both types of feedback are practiced and encouraged throughout the MDE's courses.

3.2. Other Features of Learning in the MDE Program

Harasim (1987) suggests that asynchronous delivery modes are particularly significant for graduate-level learning. In this program, where students participate from around the world, time zones place restraints on the use of synchronous technologies. Nonetheless additional applications are found in several courses and various forms of synchronous deliveries are offered to students throughout the program. Chats features are technically available in all classes and can be organized through the instructor or self organized by the participants themselves. The use of audio and video clips not only takes other learning preferences into consideration but also provides as sense of variety. Using or requiring other applications such as excel, powerpoint, and CBT enhance and/or reinforces skills, which is generally appreciated.

MDE Courses	601 (02/00)	602 (02/01)	603 (02/01)	604 (09/01)	605 (09/00)	606 (06/00)	607 (09/02)	624 (09/00)
Use of additional elements								
Telephone conferences			✓	✓				
Chat								✓
Video/ audio clips			✓					
Other (Powerpoint, Excel, CBT etc.)					✓	✓		
Provision of online materials	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

All courses make use of the webliography feature provided in WebTycho and in most courses some or all of the required or optional reading materials are provided online. This is an invaluable resource – especially to students outside the U.S. - and is highly regarded.

4. Observations and Thoughts

Harasim convincingly argues that "Collaboration is among the most effective approaches to cognitive and social learning …. Writing skills are improved, through writing to real audiences …. [and it] introduces multiple perspectives on an issue or topic" (1996, p. 207). The program's courses were developed within Moore & Kearsley's (1996) author-editor model or in the course team model. Content experts discussed what should be taught, the design to be implemented, the objectives, readings, and assignments as well as supplemental materials for a particular course. In the described areas - conferencing, participation, study groups, assignments and feedback - a variety of models regarding structure, requirements, types of facilitation, scaffolding, and support are analyzed. The instructors are not only experts in their fields, but highly motivated and devoted to making students' learning experiences deep, rich, meaningful, and successful.

Distance education students are a diverse and heterogeneous group. Research by Diaz and Cartnal (1999) indicates that distance learning students are strongly independent

and "… showed a negative relationship between the independent learning style and the collaborative and dependent styles…. In other words people who were more independent in their learning styles also tended to be less collaborative and dependent…." (p. 133). In the MDE program students must and do collaborate and participate to construct knowledge and negotiate meaning, and evaluation has shown that student satisfaction and reception are very high. This coincides with further findings from Diaz and Cartnal:

> Online students also displayed collaborative qualities related to their need for structure (dependence) and their willingness to participate as good class citizens (participant dimension). Thus, although online students prefer independent learning situations, they are willing and able to participate in collaborative work if they have the structure from the teacher to initiate it. (p. 134)

Given these circumstances some issues to be considered in upcoming faculty development events and evaluation procedures are discussed.

1. (Re)adjusting and/or juggling with different instructional styles can prove difficult for students. These various approaches accommodate different learning styles on a course to course level, but do not suit all individual learners within a course. Instructors' proactive communication with regard to philosophy, reasoning, expectations, and outcomes, advance information on participation, collaborative work, assignments (dates and content), and the provision of tools and support to deal with difficult situations are all important aspects of new roles for instructors in the online environment. Research confirms that "Announcing agendas and assignments at the beginning of the seminar not only helped students to work toward the instructional goals, but also helped instructors to organize and moderate the online activities" (Ge, Yamashiro, & Lee, 2000, para. 15). These learning opportunities should not be underestimated or left unused. Berge (1995) also reflects on this managerial role and emphasizes that "… setting the agenda for the conference, the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules, and decision-making norms" (p.24) are important elements in facilitating learning. Concurrence in this area has improved but should stay a topic of continuous exchange and debate in the program.

2. Forced participation can – for internal or external reasons - be troublesome for a number of students[15]. Highly structured approaches often result in similar answers and a high volume of tedious and repetitious reading, which does not seem to significantly contribute to the knowledge base, and makes it difficult for 'late-comers' to contribute substantially. And, if specified activities or study questions are missing, a class often only thrives if a number of students (either familiar or comfortable with the topic and process) take on the role of the peer-instructor. Transparency on how participation is merited - by frequency, length, depth, sources used, broadness of research and others – is not provided in any course. More communication and information regarding these criteria and its effect on grades seems appropriate and must be discussed in the future.

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[15] Cf. Beaudoin in this volume.

3. Closely related to this issue is feedback. If instructors rarely or never interact, students' frustration with their absence becomes evident. Ewing (2000) reports that "If ICT applications in learning do not have a significant and visible interaction with the teacher, there is the real danger that the learner will feel that the learning environment will be significantly depersonalized" (para. 61) and goes on to say that "Although taking a large amount of tutor time, this aspect of ICT in learning was recognized as being a significant contributor to its success" (para. 63). When instructors comment on students' responses in the conference areas and/or provide extensive feedback on assignments they promote a sense of acknowledgment and recognition. Bonk and Kim (1998) (as cited in Ge, Yamashiro & Lee, 2000) stress that "Scaffolded instruction makes the task evident, promotes a feeling of ownership, is individually appropriate, promotes collaboration, and fosters internalization" (para. 4). In communicating their reasoning, expectations, and practices as recognized experts in the field, instructors provide an additional learning opportunity within the course.

   Questioning by instructors and asking to pick up on peers' remarks are techniques that can stimulate these activities. Instructors' responses to students' comments, which further the development of 'conversations' along a particular line of thought are important strategies and are effectively supported by instructors modeling this behavior. Harasim believes that such interaction "… enhances connectivity and socio-emotional engagement to the learning process, as well as creating an intellectual climate that encourages participation" (1990, p. 54). These procedures and experiences merit discussions among the instructors in the program.

4. Several instructors provide a document on how to proceed and organize group work efficiently. However, only one has proactively provided advice or offered support on how to deal with issues such as general anxiety, lack of participation or commitment, loss of a group member, sense of disorientation or disorganization, disruption, or feared negative impacts on grades. This situation is particularly difficult if group work is mandatory and the outcomes are graded. Lack of self-determination and seemingly arbitrary constellations (alphabetically) can further increase anxiety. Diaz and Cartnal (1999) found designing "… collaborative activities among students that required students to initiate peer contact, and to conduct the collaboration with a minimum of teacher-provided structure and support" (p. 134) prone to failure. Online students only respond well "… if sufficient structure and guidance is provided by the instructor. The mistake … was [the assumption] … that online students would be self-directed, and autonomous, regardless of the type of learning activity" (p. 134).

   It is argued that these situations replicate 'real life' circumstances and must also be dealt with in students' professional environments. However Schermerhorn and Chapell remind us that "… electronic team meetings can cause problems, … particularly when members' working relationships are depersonalized and some of the advantages of face-to-face interaction are lost" (2000, p. 227). While instructors may imply and/or wish to create learner-centered environments, where students take on responsibility for their learning, the virtual environment increases not only the complexity of these processes, but the finding of resolutions. The paced environments, time constraints, and performance pressure are factors that hinder

careful and effective strategies to overcome difficulties. These circumstances need closer consideration and should be examined.

Twigg (2000) argues that "… we need to think more creatively about how to develop course designs that respond to a greater variety of learning styles rather than concluding that online learning is more suitable for one type of student than another" (para. 23). All instructors are knowledgeable and aware of the issues discussed above. Accommodating student's learning styles, supporting the enhancement of necessary learning skills (writing, research, and critical thinking abilities) and maximizing learning experiences in a predominately cognitive and online learning environment is a considerable undertaking.

5. Conclusions

The selected courses were designed, developed, and/or modified for the MDE program. Faculty members are SMEs and knowledgeable and experienced in distance learning. As instructors they define learning outcomes, the applications of that learning, the content, and are sensitive to potential difficulties students may encounter. Learning, collaboration, co-operation and participation take place in a variety of areas and activities. The students are active and move beyond merely reading texts. They (learn to) interact and deal with each other, the instructors and with learning materials and styles individually, in groups, and under the tutorial guidance of the instructors.

In the elements, aspects and structure of the MDE courses described in this paper these circumstances, approaches and roles have been illustrated and outlined, and some suggestions for thought and improvement made. Substantial efforts have been undertaken to develop and implement courses and methods that take these factors into consideration. Establishing consistency and coherence is supported through continuous quality assessment and ongoing adaptation and improvement of the courses. Further important steps to build and widen the experience and knowledge base within the program were initiated and discussed at the 2002 faculty meeting in Oldenburg. Space and resources were provided that allowed instructors to:

- discuss various learning styles and reflect on appropriate learning strategies,
- exchange experiences with regard to the online learning environment, design elements and aspects,
- share course documents such as syllabi, course content and required and optional readings,
- discuss burning issues, and
- systematically incorporate this information in ones own teaching and learning process.

These are significant measures to 'set the stage', not only in the MDE program but in online learning in general. They contribute to enhancing the quality of the courses and the program as well as the learning and teaching experiences for students and instructors, while a new learning paradigm is being created and experienced.

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