

## A Philosophy Primer in Virtual Seminars

Anthony Hatzimoyisis

### Report

#### What is a virtual seminar?

An exchange of views employing electronic means that connect interlocutors located in different places.

#### Why be interested in virtual seminars?

A major impetus for introducing new technologies in the teaching provision came from what we may summarily call *inspection mechanisms* (QAAE, Five Year Review, Subject Review, etc.).

Those mechanisms effect an institutional pressure on academics to meet certain criteria in the way they deliver their curriculum. We may occasionally find ourselves in a situation where we need to show why our existing methods of teaching are perfectly appropriate and that we do not need to make use of some technology simply because it is available; given, however, the complexity of producing an explanation that would satisfy the inspection mechanisms, we may decide that it will save us time and trouble to just start using the technology. Even if any department might have adopted this policy on the eve of its Subject Review visit, I submit that this is not a good reason for introducing new methods in one's teaching.

However, undergoing the inspection process has the positive side-effect of increasing *individual awareness* not only about possible limitations in one's teaching, but also about ways in which it can be more improved, and student learning can be enhanced. A significant aspect of the process in developing and assessing one's teaching provision is the emphasis on how things look from the other side, i.e., not how we teach but how students learn. Placing students at the centre of the educational process calls for methods that allow students an important role in shaping the delivery of the curriculum. Seminars thus came to acquire a prominent place in bringing students in, as equal partners in the pedagogical transaction; and virtual seminars seems to be the next step in the direction of increasing students participation by offering a space where each student, no less than the tutor, can set a discussion agenda, explore with fellow students only certain themes in depth, while leaving other themes for discussion by other students.

#### How do Virtual Seminars work?

We may distinguish between technical issues pertaining to the programmes in information technology required for virtual seminars, and organisational considerations. I shall concentrate here only on the latter issues.

At the organisational level, the virtual seminars acquire one of two forms:

- **synchronous** seminars in which the participants are online in the same time, and communicate electronically by sending or receiving messages for the duration of a set session;
- **asynchronous** seminars in which participants can enter the discussion at different times during an academic period, by introducing a new theme, and by reading and replying to existing messages.

For the past three years I have been organising both types of seminars, across different levels (both undergraduate and postgraduate), and for distinct types of modules, some of which were 'theme-based', e.g., 'Ethics', and some were focused on particular philosophers and their texts e.g., 'Aristotle'). In what follows I refer not to ideas about virtual seminars in general, but only to the actual experience of my team in running virtual seminars.

A synchronous seminar runs once a week, at a specified day and time, lasting for approximately one hour. The tutor sends a welcome message followed by students greetings confirming their presence online. The number of students may vary between 2 minimum, to 5 maximum. The tutor would either initiate a discussion by typing a question as soon as all students were online, or she would invite a student to pose a question for the group to discuss. These questions were not set in advance and were often, though not always, related to topics on that week's lecture. All the messages of each session were saved in a log-book accessible only to the tutor. After the session the tutor would edit a copy of the session's log-book, and she would distribute it to the participants by email.

The advantages of this type of seminar were not inconsiderable: the limited number of participants meant that students could concentrate on a particular theme, try out their ideas in writing, benefit from the tutor's and other students views on that topic, and acquire a record of this discussion for further study. From the tutor's perspective, the small size of the seminar could offer the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses of each student,, creating the opportunity for individual attention to students needs, that is not usually afforded in a standard tutorial of ten or even more students. The log-book facility could also resolve one of the major obstacles in assessing student performance in the face to face tutorials, as it makes available a full record of the seminar, creating an independent point of reference for the tutor or any persons involved in the assessment process.

However, these benefits come, quite literally, at a price. Running synchronous seminars for a class of, say, 30 students requires from a tutor a minimum of 6 hours per week. As these virtual seminars are offered on top of the standard tutorial sessions, they entail a very substantial increase in the tutor's weekly load. Even if they were offered instead of the traditional tutorials, they would still require double the time of having a traditional tutorial of around 10 students. In either case, my experience suggests that it is not feasible to run synchronous seminars without ensuring the availability of increased staff hours: which, of course, has direct resource implications.

Another problem with the synchronous seminar is that its fixed duration might restrict the number and length of student contributions. The time limits of each session seem to create pressure on students who may want to expand on their views, or to respond simultaneously to several points made in the discussion; and this pressure is most clearly evidenced in the inventiveness of participants in abbreviating their messages by using half words, fancy symbols, or other types of jargon comprehensible perhaps to their fellow students, but very rarely to their tutor.

This problem seems to be resolved in **asynchronous** seminars, which run throughout the teaching term, and operate as a student **Forum**. Each course has a forum with a certain number of discussion **Topics**. At the start of the module, the tutor organises the forum by posting, say 5 different messages, defining 5 different **main topics**. These messages have a **distinct heading**, an **introductory paragraph** including some ideas or open questions, as well as a couple of **reading suggestions** on the topic. A student who joins the forum may see all the main topics, and choose one (or more) of them as the topic(s) on which he or she will contribute. Each student message on a topic is automatically listed as a reply to the previous message on that same topic, thus creating a discussion **thread**. All messages on each topic are available for anyone in the course to read, elaborate upon, reply to, or criticise.

The forum also includes a main topic for the standard course tutorials; for the tutorials section students are requested to post the handouts of their face to face tutorial presentations. This thread is used exclusively for publicising the

handout to the rest of the class and cannot be employed as another place for conducting online discussion. This ensures that the Forum is not used as a substitute for the tutorial meetings, but as a space for discussion on topics raised and explored in that forum.

It is worth mentioning here, that this particular way of organising Virtual Seminars entails that a pair of items which are traditionally included in online forums, are effectively excluded. First of all, there is no thread devoted to administrative or procedural issues: no announcements about change of course venue, no tips about exam preparation, no news about the weather. This is a deliberate decision, that effectively screens out the use of forum for non-substantial matters, and which helps to ensure that students log on to the Forum for engaging in philosophical discussion.

Secondly, the Forum does not include a 'book reviews' section: although the idea of asking students to post a book review on the forum is quite common, I believe that individual messages offering a book review stall, rather than promote discussion. Unless a particular book is itself a topic for critical study by several students, it is unlikely -and my research into this issue shows that it is nearly impossible- that a review of a book can by itself initiate a discussion among students who have no previous knowledge of that text.

In a nutshell, the forum aims to act, not as a means of conveying information, but as a space for conducting a dialogue about philosophical themes raised in a particular course.

## Reality Check

After this general description of the structure of virtual seminars, let me draw your attention to three important questions. First, ***how much staff time is involved in the running of asynchronous seminars?*** Each course requires a tutor who will set the main topics for the course forum, who will follow the student discussion as it envelopes, and who, if required, will contribute to the discussion by making a comment, or raising a question that would facilitate the development of a line of reasoning. In practice, the tutor's messages count for around 10% of a 2nd year course forum, and around 7% of a 3d year forum. Note that this is much less than the time consumed in running a synchronous seminar, i.e., one hour per week multiplied by the number of seminar groups taking the course: for a class of 30 students, a forum tutor may spend in total a maximum of 2 hours per week for reading or commenting on student discussion, as opposed to a minimum of 6 hours per week for actually running each one of at least 6 different synchronous seminars. Note, though, that the tutor's contribution is a ***sine qua non*** of a virtual seminar: in all cases where we set up a course forum, without defining main topics, but simply by letting students post messages, without any feedback whatsoever from a tutor, the forum would quietly but quickly die out.

The second issue I would like to consider is also practical: ***is there a place for student assessment in virtual seminars?*** Assessment comes in two forms: formative (which focuses on feedback) and summative (which concentrates on marking). In terms of formative assessment, it is justifiable to claim that the whole process of participating in a forum discussion, where one presents one's ideas, and receives positive, negative, instructive, or de-constructive responses by one's fellow students or tutor, is an ideal case of formative assessment.

Summative assessment is also possible given that the following conditions apply:

- students are aware of specific criteria they may have to meet, either quantitatively (e.g., number and regularity of posted messages), or qualitatively (e.g., knowledge, relevance, critical ability, and related issues in student performance);
- (ii) the electronic system can provide the required data, by generating an accurate profile of each student's contributions for each course forum -thus covering the quantitative aspect of assessment;
- the tutor has the time available to read through each student's contribution (either on a weekly basis, or at the end of the teaching period) and to give a mark for the content of student performance -thus catering for qualitative aspects.

A further question about summative assessment might concern the actual number of credits, or percentage of an overall mark, to be allocated for student performance in virtual seminars. The policy we adopted was to offer a 17% for overall seminar performance, 33% for the assessed essay, and 50% for the exam paper. The seminar mark included 10% for face to face tutorials and just 7% for online seminars. However, this has been just a practical way of introducing a marking scheme for virtual seminars, without disturbing the existing university regulations. In my view, the question of assessment cannot be answered adequately unless we address the third general issue I wish to raise.

This issue concerns what we might call the ***Integration Problem***: what is the role of virtual seminars within a classroom based curriculum provision, premised on the view that teaching, learning, and assessment take place in University premises? The solution to the integration problem may take various forms. We might claim that the problem is not substantial: all that is required is that we articulate certain options of fitting virtual seminar assessment in the existing curriculum, test the pros and cons of each option by funding people to include virtual seminars in their modules, until we eventually come up with a recipe that keeps the university, the examiners, and, above all, the examined satisfied. Alternatively, we might try to think deep and hard about the objectives we currently set for our learning strategy, whether the facility offered by online seminars map to those objectives, and how the skills employed in a virtual seminar are conducive to them. Ideally, perhaps, we should do both: draw on the practical experience of running virtual seminars in different ways, and reflect on the how our teaching and learning strategy can be enhanced by different media of curriculum provision.

This process is, of course, already underway, and the steady increase of interest in new educational technologies shows that we can be justifiably optimistic about the concrete benefits that the collaborative projects between academics, their local training and support units, and the national teaching and learning networks will deliver.

I wish to conclude, however, by asking why we are faced with an Integration Problem, in the first place. My view is that this problem is symptomatic of the fact that virtual seminars, along with other methods of computer technology, did not spring out of the actual practice of academic education. They did not constitute an elaboration on the existing ways of teaching and learning through talking, reading and writing; instead, these technologies arrived in the educational scene at some point during the nineties, presented us with their exciting facilities, and, then, let us struggle with their own -sometimes insurmountable- technical limitations, their unceasing tendency to mutate in 'versions', and, most importantly, the task of persuading our less enthusiastic colleagues about the alleged necessity of joining us on the virtual platform. Whether or not this train of events will reach the land of our educational aspirations, I like to think that it is certainly worth the journey.\*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dan Abbott and Eva Stamou for extensive discussions on technical and pedagogical issues, and the audience at the 'Uses of On-line Texts and Resources in Philosophy Learning and Teaching' meeting for their questions and comments.

---

Created on: April 17th 2007

Updated on: May 22nd 2008