

Falloon, G. (2011). Exploring the Virtual Classroom: What Students Need to Know (and Teachers Should Consider), *Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 7 (4), 439-451.

This journal outlines a study which took place to explore the affordances and limitations of an online virtual classroom with an undergraduate and postgraduate group of education students. It explores student experiences and identifies areas that online teachers and course developers need to be cognisant of to ensure students get the best from this new learning environment. Firstly the study identifies three specific areas of knowledge that are critical to student performance in online classrooms. In addition it suggests that synchronous environments supplement rather than replace asynchronous environments, it highlights that this emerging technology will take time to normalise so educators should not penalise students who have access to varying levels of technology and it establishes the importance of having a clear purpose and relevance for using the technology. Falloon concludes by acknowledging the need for more research on identifying best practice models for virtual classroom use to ensure students gain the best advantage in this new environment.

Falloon provides the background to the study and through literature identifies interaction as being crucial to online course effectiveness. He suggests that while literature indicates the importance of interaction to support learning it is less clear on the most effective ways of facilitating this online and seeks to add to research through the study. The study comprises of two groups of students. Their similarities lie in the fact that both groups are studying education. They differ in that one group comprises of undergraduates studying using a blended learning approach while the other is post graduates studying completely online. Falloon provides clear rationale as to why the study draws on the tool mediation principle of Engestrom's Activity theory and the approach and methods used for data collection and coding. The appointment of a research assistant and the application of an inter-rater reliability treatment at the conclusion of the coding process enhance the validity of the findings. The findings and results of both groups are collectively presented using clearly defined themes and sub themes relating to the research questions. Quotations from interviews with specific students support the findings of the anonymous questionnaire both of which were undertaken at the end of the virtual classroom sessions. The data and

discussion identify key areas for thought for online teachers and course designers using online classrooms and recognise the need for further research in the area.

Falloon indicates that there is limited research on this topic and I find I am in agreement with him. Having read other journals in the search for appropriate material this is the first journal I have found that is particularly pertinent to the subject of my research. Whilst reading the journal I became aware of my need to remain objective regarding the content as I began to identify with the comments of the students and began to compare their experiences with my own. Although Falloon identifies technical, procedural and operational knowledge as being critical to student performance in this environment, the study points to other aspects that need to be considered when using this technology. For me the initial step is the selection of the technology which Falloon is quick to point out compliments rather than replaces asynchronous online learning and the need to ensure that the online classroom is the most appropriate technology for the topic or module being taught. This leads to illustrating the clear purpose and relevance of the technology for learners as data indicated that students felt there was little point in using the technology just for the sake of it. The study also indicates the need to start small as Falloon admits that in hindsight it was not a good idea to trial the technology on a high stakes assessment task due to the lack of adequate time to allow familiarisation. The knowledge areas identified in the study as critical to enabling students get the best from these new environments provide the online teacher with a basis to develop appropriate strategies. However reflecting on the groups involved in the study I am conscious that these knowledge areas increase in importance for learners who have never experienced synchronous or asynchronous on line learning environments. Finally it is interesting that data revealed the synchronous nature of the online class room detracted from the level of interaction as students felt self-conscious. This aspect of the study leads me to consider how students would compare the synchronous nature of the online classroom to that of a conventional classroom. Their input would provide further direction on creating best practice guidelines for the online classroom instructor.

