

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.

In this article Falloon uses an interpretative case study to explore the affordances and limitations of an online Virtual Classroom with two groups of students. The research indicates that while both groups of students found using the virtual classroom a worthwhile experience, they also found difficulty transferring interaction and communication skills developed in asynchronous and face to face contexts to the synchronous online environment. Falloon identifies the reasons for this as relating to three specific areas of knowledge that are critical to student performance in a virtual classroom and suggests that educators and course designers need to include strategies in online courses to enable students to develop this knowledge. Falloon concludes by suggesting that while the virtual classroom facilitates the development of social presence and a sense of community it may not be as beneficial for supporting deeper learning and the challenge is to identify a balance between both modes to ensure the most effective online learning environment is created for students.

Falloon clearly states the three research questions that guide the data collection for the study and the methods used. There is a full discussion on the findings and results under each of the themes identified from the data that relate back to the research questions. The discussion includes representative samples of the data to illustrate student thoughts. Based on the findings Falloon identifies three areas of knowledge – technical, procedural and operational and argues that they must be present to a significant extent for students to gain value from the virtual classroom experience. He contends there is a danger in assuming students will just “hit the ground running” in these environments so consideration must be given to developing knowledge across the three domains. Secondly he suggests the virtual classroom supports collaboration and social presence rather than reflective discussion. Thirdly the findings illustrate that virtual classrooms are still an emerging technology and should not be used for the completion of high stake assessment tasks without allowing for adequate familiarisation and finally the study points to the importance students place on the relevance and purpose of the use of the technology.

While this study illustrates the various types of knowledge that need to be present for students to gain the optimal advantage from attending a virtual classroom the aspect I have

found most interesting is that it illustrates the level of rigour employed by the author when completing the research. Farquhar (2012) explains that she uses the analogy of the spine when discussing data collection in case study research with her students. She suggests that rather than it being a linear process, it is a process which provides a clear line of sight from the research questions to the data collection process and the findings. Falloon provides this all through the article. A change in my research project has led to a change in methodologies and I am now using a case study approach. Having read some of the literature surrounding this approach I am more informed however this article illustrates how to put the suggestions into practise. Apart from the approach taken the findings provide me with relevant information on what knowledge we should ensure is available for students about to take part in an online learning environment for the first time.