NEW COMMUNICATION PRACTICES, IDENTITY AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL GAP: LEARNING E-MAIL ON A ‘DISTANCE’, PARTLY-TAUGHT PH.D PROGRAMME

by

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New communication practices, identity and the psychological gap: the affective function of e-mail on a distance ‘Thesis and Coursework’ doctoral programme

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Abstract

Distance or Open learning in Higher Education is now closely associated with computer-mediated communication (CMC). Distance education however is not only a question of new technology, but of pedagogy and learning, and of the implications of new technology for these (Sherry, 1996). For the doctoral distance student, a further issue may be one of identity – as a student registered with one institution, while (often) working as a professional at another. Taking as data e-mail messages sent by Ph.D. students over the first two years of a (largely) distance programme, I suggest that while one important contribution of e-mail is clearly the speed and ease of its use, this contribution is more than maintenance of a communication channel. Not only can message-senders remain in touch almost constantly, they can also take steps to obtain support, can inscribe their multiple identities within their messages, and can adapt the medium for their own needs. These can have particular value for professionals studying part-time on distance programmes.

Keywords: e-mail, distance learning, doctoral programmes, identity

Introduction: distance learning and e-mail

… when we talk about distance education we are referring to a distance that is more than simply a geographic separation of learners and teachers. It is a distance of understandings and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance, that has to be overcome by teachers, learners and educational organisations … (Moore, 1991: 2).

Distance learning as a path to a postgraduate qualification is on the increase – for academic institutions seeking to diversify, and for professionals who need these qualifications but are unable to leave their jobs. Over the last two decades its efficiency and attractiveness have increased, arguably because of the Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), including electronic (e-)mail, which allows for the possibility of rapid communication between teachers and students as well as Web-based teaching. E-mail has been investigated by linguists and educationalists alike.
Linguists have been concerned with the nature of e-mail itself: is it more like speech or like writing? is it a genre? can it be seen as a product of ‘language’ (speech, writing) contact? how do different social groups use it? (e.g. Baron, 2000; Chang and Hsu, 1998; Herring, 1996; Moran and Hawisher, 1998; Spooner and Yancy, 1996). Educationalists have been concerned with its potential as an alternative, or supplement, to traditional face-to-face teaching (Liaw, 1998; Newlands and Ward, 1999). Swales and Feak (1994) provide advice on the proper use of e-mail in English for students who are non-native-writers of English (note that this is potentially relevant to students who see their tutors/supervisors every day and to those who may see them only once a year).

The meaning of ‘distance learning’ has now broadened considerably, to the extent that it can even be used to mean ‘non face-to-face’ – so that the tutor could be in one room, the student working at a computer in the next (see Sherry, 1996). Much ‘distance learning’ is more accurately described as ‘distributed learning’, in that it employs both different technologies and either traditional campus-based delivery (Bates, 1997) or face-to-face delivery elsewhere. However, on distance programmes typically there is still a geographical gap for much (if not all) of the time; there is, again typically, in addition, a temporal gap. Months may go by without the teacher and student meeting face-to-face at all. Further, if the students are in employment, their periods of study may be sporadic. Because of the salience of this, it has been suggested (Marsden, 1996: 228) that “Distance education concentrates on space, to the neglect of time”. For while the distance consideration must be addressed (or there would be no programme), the temporal aspect does not have to be.

Together, these geographical and temporal gaps can be seen as creating “a psychological and communications gap, a space of potential misunderstanding
between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (Moore, 1991: 2-3; see also Wheeler, Vranch and Reid, 1999). Such a gap may also exist in face-to-face teaching, of course, but there it may be more easily identified, with more opportunities for remediation. This suggests a consideration of the particular affective needs of the distance learner, as well as her or his pedagogic needs. However, the psychological gap may also be an effect of the complex identity of the distance student. He or she is likely, after all, to be working as a professional, possibly even doing the same sort of job as the teachers on his or her distance programme. And this psychological gap may not only be an effect of the relationship between student and the ‘distant’ tutor, but also of the differences between the institution with which the student studies and that at which s/he works, the academic discourse practices by which they are characterised, and the political regimes which directly or indirectly govern these two institutions. This psychological gap can, then, result in problems such as mistrust, misconceptions of what is really expected, lack of understanding of procedures and requirements (say, for assessment), loss of confidence, demotivation and anxiety (Jegede and Kirkwood, 1994). Since face-to-face talk, which may ameliorate some problems for the full-time student, is simply not available for most of the ‘distant’ student’s study time, this psychological gap may contribute to the phenomenon of part-time distance students dropping out at a higher rate than full-time students (Willis, 1993: 20).

Jegede and Kirkwood claim that, in distance education, it is affective issues which may “dictate and sustain the need to study” (1994: 280). One such issue is ‘perceived caring’ (Teven and McCroskey, 1996: 8), which in distance programmes could be associated with the provision and perception of continuous student support and availability, and with actual contact. In this paper I am arguing that e-mail can provide the support, and hence can have an important affective role. I also argue that e-mail
can provide an opportunity for students to stay in touch on their terms – an important identity issue. Amid all the concern for CMC as information technology, as well as with outcomes of distance education programmes (Hara and Kling, 1999), the affective role of e-mail as an aspect of CMC may hitherto not have been given the recognition or acknowledgement it deserves. Indeed, since for reasons of availability most research in this area has been on “one-to-many” conversation (e.g. from Listserv databases) (see Baron, 2000), one-to-one e-mail exchanges themselves are relatively under-explored.

**Distance learning on a ‘Ph.D. by Thesis and Coursework’ programme**

Distance education at all levels is growing in Higher Education (Hara and Kling, 1999). However, though they are not usually thus represented, Ph.D. programmes are and have often been done through ‘distance learning’, i.e. by those doctoral students who are part-time and not resident on or near the campus of the University at which they are registered. In this paper, I report on a study of e-mail use by one very particular group of students who are studying on a five-year Ph.D. programme in applied linguistics which requires both a thesis and coursework (something still unusual at this level in this field in the UK). The ‘distance’ aspect of this Ph.D. programme therefore refers here primarily to its ‘marked’ distance feature: the initial courses. Most of these are taught partly on Residentials, and partly with distance materials (making this technically a ‘distributed learning’ rather than a ‘distance’ programme).

The students are a group of fourteen Romanian academics, thirteen women and one man, with an average age mid- to late-thirties. They are teaching in English Departments in different Romanian Universities, and studying for Ph.D.s in different areas of Applied Linguistics at Lancaster University, UK. They were selected from
some thirty applicants after writing a research proposal, being interviewed and completing an academic writing task.

The rationale behind the programme was to create a group of Applied Linguists in Romania where before there was something of a gap. At the start these academics had a high level of familiarity with English literature, formal linguistics and teacher education – but not applied linguistics (i.e. language in actual use).

Both geographical and temporal gaps are true of this programme. The participants teach full-time, and are in Romania for eleven months of the year, meeting as a group only on Residentials, four times a year (once in Lancaster) for the first four years of the programme. There are many reasons why they should experience a psychological gap (in addition to the reasons of time and space). They are studying for their doctorates as a group in Lancaster as part of a British Council programme, when under different circumstances they would probably have applied to a range of Universities in different countries. They are taught applied linguistics in many cases by people whose knowledge of descriptive linguistics is inferior to their own. They are researching and writing in an academic discourse community very different from that in which they work. Ten of the fourteen have colleagues who are also on the programme, which doubtless helps to close the gap a little, but four have no such colleagues. And many find that they have problems talking about the programme with colleagues who are not on the programme – and some simply don’t talk about it with colleagues who are not on the programme.

**Early use of e-mail**

Learning a new medium to communicate with others, however well you know the language of use, has been referred to as developing a ‘specific dialogic sub-competence’ (Mininni, 1985). Mininni gives the example of elderly people having to
use a telephone for the first time, and reports on an investigation of very young children’s telephone interaction using their first language – but the principle is the same. Before the programme started, there was very little ‘specific dialogic sub-competence’ when it came to e-mail use by the group. Only three of the participants had access to e-mail, and some had never used it until they came to Lancaster for the first time in July 1997. The last person was not logged on in Romania until September 1998, nearly two years into the programme (though they had all used it in Lancaster in July 1997). (The names are fictionalised. Since there was only one man, I have preserved his identity by giving him a female name, and calling one of the women ‘Emil’.)

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I am trying to use the e-mail and it doesn’t seem to work. hope you get this eventually.

Catri², 18/7/97, 9.42

As I have just learned how to use the e-mail, I can now reply to one of your earlier messages. .... … I’m also glad I’ve finally got over the ‘e-mail handicap’, as your receiving this message will hopefully show.

Catri, 18/7/97, 9.44

I have finally got my own e-mail (as of ten minutes ago!)

Catri, 3/11/97

E-mail is so nice, I think I’ll become addicted to it.

Catri, 27/11/97

I am finally on e-mail again, after nearly two months of desperate efforts

Catri, 22/5/98

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I have a new e-mail address and want to check whether it works. It would feel great to be in touch with you again.

Ema, 9/12/98

I’m sorry it took me so long to answer your message. You probably know the reasons. I DO RECEIVE MAIL and I am very excited about it.

Rodi, 15/7/98
We are connected live – as it took 2 minutes to get your answer back. Isn’t that wonderful?  
Rodi, 28/5/99

I have finally succeeded in reading your message, but not all by myself, I’m afraid. As for your question regarding the computer I really hate it right now, but this has to change in the near future.  
Kitty, 15/7/97

I am very happy to have an answer to one of the messages I have sent. It proves that I have really ‘tamed’ the monster ….
Kitty, 17/8/97

I hope to God you will receive this message which will prove that our e-mail works at this end of the ‘chain’.  
Mari, 27/2/98

Today I managed to have my password set right so I can answer your messages….  
It feels OK now I’ve started but it took some time to get over the idea that I would not be able to use it.  
Aba, 16/7/97

All fourteen now have access to e-mail, some on home computers. However, these early messages indicate the joys and pains of early use of what Moran and Hawisher (1998: 89) describe as a “powerful and seductive technology”. Several things are particularly striking. First is the amount of vocabulary of an affective nature: hope, glad, finally, nice, addicted, desperate, great, excited, hate, happy, ‘tamed the monster’, ‘it took some time to get over the idea that I would not be able to use it’.

Second, given the frequently referred to ‘hybridity’ of e-mail, i.e. that it contains both ‘speech-like’ and ‘writing-like’ elements (Herring, 1996), these messages all consist of all grammatically-correct written sentences. Thirdly, these writers (as do others) all make ‘metalinguistic’ comments about the medium itself (this form of meta-language has also been identified in other forms of CMC, e.g. Condon and Cech, 1996).
Fourthly, they convey a sense of immediacy: “I can now reply …”, “it took 2 minutes to get your answer….”, “Today I managed to have my password set right”.

My first intention was to do a longitudinal study of the participants’ early e-mail messages as the ‘learning of a new medium’. However, since they had learned so fast, I decided instead to look at the way the participants adapted this new medium to their needs. I report on the different purposes they used e-mail for, then on how they linked their response messages to those they were replying to. I relate these to identity, to this programme, and to distance learning in general.

The data

The data consisted of 164 e-mail messages from twelve of the participants written to the Programme Co-ordinator (me). None of these 12 were my own supervisees, which may partly explain the apparently rather small number of messages. My two supervisees on this programme were excluded from this sample since their messages to me were different in kind as well as number from those of the others.

The 164 messages were those written between January 1997 and December 1998 – a period of 24 months, during which coursework, rather than the dissertation, was the main focus of the programme.

Communicative purposes: ‘Initiating’ and ‘responding’ messages

An initial, obvious but useful division of the 164 messages was ‘responding messages’ and ‘initiating messages’. If someone sends you a message, especially the programme co-ordinator, you may feel obliged to respond, and all you have to do is hit ‘Reply’, write, and hit ‘Send’. ‘Initiating’, however, requires and implies more communicative autonomy (as well as slightly more challenging keyboard skills). The sender has to re-open the channel of communication – comparable in some ways to attracting the attention of someone you know but who is busily engaged, and perhaps
not expecting a ‘summons’ at all, or to the ‘summons’ of a telephone ring (see
Hopper, 1992). The ‘initiating’/‘responding’ distinction is of course not a
capeutically watertight or even reliable one. However, the working definition was
that a message was a response if it was evident from the words that even part of it was
in response to a message from me – otherwise, it was considered by default to be an
‘initiating message’. Excluded from either category were twelve messages part of
which were responses to some other text, e.g. responses to written feedback on an
assignment, or to something in the programme Newsletter. This left 152 initiating and
responding messages. The frequency of these 152 is shown in Table I.

[Table I about here]

Each person sent me between four and twenty-two ‘initiating’ and ‘responding’
messages during this period. Approximately the same number of messages were
responses (seventy-four) as were initiating messages (seventy-eight). Three of the
five people who sent the fewest messages – Aba, Mari and Ema – were the people
who gained access to e-mail the latest. There were different patterns here – some
people initiating only after responding to several messages; others initiating straight
away. But, clearly, there was not just an ability but also a willingness on the part of
everyone to initiate as well as politely respond.

To look at how these doctoral students actively took control of this new medium, I
looked first at the particular communicative purposes of the ‘initiating’ messages.

‘Initiating’ messages

As indicated, I categorised a message as ‘Initiating’ if it did not contain any apparent
response to a previous message of mine. The unit of analysis for ‘Initiating’
communicative purposes was what Herring (1996), writing on messages sent to
Internet mailing lists, refers to as a ‘macrosegment’: a “functional constituent of the text at a macro- or global level of organisation”. Herring identified these macrosegments “according to their notional coherence and their surface cohesion” (Herring, 1996: 83). Looking at communicative purposes realised as macrosegments made more sense than looking at each ‘message’ as a whole, for the obvious reason that, even without looking for subtexts or underlying intentions, an e-mail message often has more than one communicative purpose.

The communicative purposes fell into three broad types: Telling About, Asking For, and Other. ‘Other’ included a range of language functions, and often concerned topics directly unrelated to the programme (see below).

In the 78 initiating messages, there were 55 ‘Asking For’ communicative purpose macrosegments, 89 ‘Telling About’ and 43 ‘Other’. A given ‘Initiating’ message typically had two or all of ‘Asking For’, ‘Telling About’ and ‘Other’ communicative purposes.

‘Initiating’ messages: ‘Asking For’

The participants used e-mail for a variety of ‘Asking For’ initiating purposes, mostly programme-related. The frequencies of these are shown in Table II and explained where necessary below. The participants were asking for:

(a) advice about coursework
(b) advice about something else, e.g. written work such as the ‘Upgrading Portfolio’ or the dissertation topic, whether or not to contact the supervisor about something, how to attend a particular Conference
(c) extensions for assignments: these requests had to be made in writing
(d) information, e.g. about upgrading requirements perceived as unclear, or Residential academic and social programme details
(e) a ‘favour’, e.g. something formally outside (but informally inside) what could be expected, for example help with ordering a book, or with something in their professional lives not connected directly with the programme
a message to be conveyed, e.g. to a supervisor, for example if they were unsure that a message sent had been received (such requests were often implicit, but perceived and treated as requests by me)

confirmation, e.g. of the arrival of an assignment

permission, e.g. to leave a Residential early, to post rather than fax a late assignment

Often more than one thing was ‘Asked For’ in the same message (see Anca, Maria, Cris, Rodi, Emil). Inevitably, different people asked for different things, and some were more willing to ask than others (Ema asked for nothing; Tania and Rodi made several requests), but most participants clearly felt Asking For something to be a legitimate use of the medium. ‘Asking For’ had a clear practical function in eliciting support; to the extent they felt they received it (as evidenced presumably by the continuing use of ‘Asking For’ messages), this can be seen as ‘perceived caring’.

‘Initiating’ messages: ‘Telling About’

There was a similar wide variety of ‘Telling About’ messages (for frequencies see Table III). The participants told me about:

(a) coursework: often to let me know progress
(b) the programme: information, such as plans for research
(c) their use of e-mail itself
(d) feelings: a lot was written about feelings about the programme, in particular about what it felt having like completed an assignment, or having got an assignment back, complete with result and feedback
(e) family/leisure/health, e.g. holidays, children’s development
(f) professional, e.g. teaching loads and content, Conferences
(g) general/other: topics ranged from the weather to the political situation in different parts of eastern Europe

‘Telling About’, being less transactional and instrumental than ‘Asking For’, may suggest a greater desire to communicate in order to communicate. This is further evidenced by the fact that many of these messages (more than the ‘Asking For’
(a) thanking: largely for programme-related things, e.g. the content of a Residential
(b) apologising, e.g. for submitting an assignment late, or for ‘bothering’ me with a request
(c) expressing good wishes, e.g. at Christmas or Easter
(d) inviting/suggesting/offering; usually non-programme related, e.g. offers of assistance with pre- or post-Residential travel

Of the ‘Other’ Initiating messages, then, only ‘Apologising’ and ‘Thanking’ were centrally concerned with the programme. These may have been the students just being polite, but may also have been an effect of their working within not only a new
academic discourse community but also an unfamiliar bureaucracy, and being unsure of the nature or fixedness of the programme goalposts, or of what they could reasonably expect. ‘Expressing good wishes’, and ‘Inviting/suggesting/offering’ again provided evidence of interpersonal use, often co-occurring with the informational and programme-related uses of the same message. ‘Expressing good wishes’, the strikingly largest ‘Other’ group (e-mail being used by all but one of the participants for this), was often the sole purpose of a message. ‘Happy Easter’ was rarely, for example, tagged on at the end of a message, but typically appeared in a more elaborate form unaccompanied by any academic purpose whatsoever. Arguably what is being asserted here by these participants is a perceived personal relationship of equality, which may contrast with other programme identities.

Each participant used ‘Asking For’, ‘Telling’ and ‘Other’ initiating messages in different proportions, and for different purposes, so all apparently found it helpful, both in eliciting support and staying in touch through personal, non-programme issues. Through these different ‘initiating’ messages, the participants were, I suggest, enacting their multiple identities as doctoral students who frequently needed something - but also as professionals in their own right, and simply as people.

‘Response’ messages

I will now look at the seventy-four ‘Response’ messages, focusing on the linking of these with the messages to which they are replying. This establishing of relevance is necessary in any form of dialogue if smooth communication is to be achieved, but is harder in asynchronous dialogue (such as that in e-mail and fax messages, as well as letters), and is thus an aspect of the ‘specific dialogic subcompetence’ of e-mail use which needs to be learned.
The responses are clearly heterogeneous in their linking strategies. Some resembled *formal letters* in tone, in that the first sentence achieved linkage with the message being responded to by explicitly acknowledging that previous message – as message. For example:

Thanks for yours and also thank you in retrospect for your advice which I'll follow. Thank you for your message about the Conference on bilingualism. Rodi forwarded me your message.

Thanks for your message and sorry to have taken so long to answer, but I had meetings with the [group of] teachers in the first half of the week.

Thanks for the messages confirming passing assignments.

I have only today read the message you sent back in August.

Thank you very much for letting me know that I have passed the assignment for Researching Language Classrooms.

Thank you for the VERY good news.

I have just received your reply to Peter’s message about my worries.

Thank you so much for your morale-boosting and reassuring message.

I've received your message about pairing/grouping in House 10.

In that these acknowledgements were all immediately followed by the ‘point’ of the response, they might be seen as ‘pre-responses’.

Many other messages, however, did not use a pre-response, but rather in the first sentence made immediate reference to the *topic* or main point of, or question asked in, the message being responded to. For example:

This is good news.

It is OK.

Does it mean I (almost) have the books?

It will most probably be the weekend of 17-19 July and I am pretty sure I will have accommodation.

[Current supervisor] himself told me and I am grateful he did so.

I will somehow try to produce an assignment for the Cluj meeting.

Thank you for making the extension possible.

Yes, it is my own (new) computer in the new flat.

I’m glad you had a non-eventful trip back to Lancaster.

THIS IS REALLY GOOD NEWS!!

From my point of view the period 21-25 would be the best.

Thank you very much, I'm going to e-mail her and see.
Thanks!
This summer was hectic for me too.
Both topics are of great interest for me; so it’s the others who have to decide.

A simple contextualised example of one of the above is Maria’s response to my
enquiry as to whether she knew her supervisor was leaving:

From: m.ciobanu@hotmail.ro
Sent: 22 June 1998 13.25
To: j.sunderland@lancaster.ac.uk
Subject: [name of current supervisor]

Dear Jane
Indeed [supervisor] gave me the news. I was a bit disheartened in the first place, but
I didn’t feel abandoned at all. I was hoping that [name] would accept me as her
supervisee. I am looking forward to working with her.
Best wishes and see you soon,
Maria

The linkage in this second group of messages with those being responded to is
essentially implicit, relying on the receiver of the message to make the link for
herself.

Both types of response can be seen as cohesive, i.e. able to be made full sense of
when read in conjunction with the initiating message, and in the responses there are
many linguistically different ways of establishing this cohesion. Both types depend on
shared knowledge and common interests, requiring recognition of a particular
referent. And both types of responses can only be made sense of in this way
(something characteristic also of conversation and informal letters). Despite these
similarities, however, the response messages nevertheless differ in their use and non-
use of the ‘pre-response’. And this is interesting because it is almost evenly divided.
32 of the 74 responses refer to the previous message as message, and 31 go straight to
the main topic. (In the remaining eleven the first sentence refers to something else
entirely.) Explicit acknowledgement thus appears neither obligatory nor marked. Most
of the participants seem willing and have the facility both to use and not use ‘pre-
responses’.

Phone calls have been described as being “routinised”, because of the ritual moves in
their openings (Mininni, 1985). These responses could be similarly characterised. The
two types of response – that which formally and explicitly makes the link with the
initiating message by acknowledging it as message, and that which links by jumping
straight to the relevant content, acknowledging the initiating message as message only
implicitly - were distinct, and both were frequent.

So what for makes the heterogeneity in these linking practices, or degree of
(in)formality? In Herring’s study of Internet mailing lists, she found that around two
thirds of the messages started with an explicit link to a previous message (1996: 87).
Given that several discussions are running on a List at a given point in time, this
clearly helped maintain coherence. It is then interesting that as many as 32 of these 74
dyadic responses included this explicit acknowledgement of the message to which
they were responding. The explanation may be partly that these message writers when
drawing on their identities as students decided to err on the side of caution, or at least
what they saw as politeness. However it is often politeness in the form of formality,
rather than helpfully identifying the topic (since the topic is not always identified
within the acknowledgement). It may also be that they saw e-mail messages as letters,
which could then be formalised or informalised. This can be seen either as an
unwillingness on the part of the participants to experiment with this new medium – or,
more positively, as principled use of the new medium for their own ends, taking
control in their own way. Condon and Cech comment, “the non-obligatory nature of
acknowledgements [in CMC] suggest that they might be a useful category to
investigate the influence of social factors in discourse” (1996: 79). Further study of
the identity and motivations of the ‘distance’ doctoral student could help in such investigations.

Conclusion

Hara and Kling (1999: 2) warn that “The literature about distance education is dominated by enthusiastic studies and accounts” (evidence of an unsettled field of study, perhaps), and query the ease with which they see the implementation and running of distance programmes as represented. This account is similarly enthusiastic about one aspect of CMC in a distance programme – the affective role and value of e-mail - but does not claim to generalise beyond this aspect.

Two of the questions in a post-Residential questionnaire (April 1999) were ‘To what extent, and how, has e-mail made a difference to you on the … programme?’ and ‘What are its functions, for you?’ Several respondents referred to the speed of e-mail (“creates a sense of urgency about the need to reply, which is good in long-distance communication”), and in accessing information. One respondent referred to a clear identity issue: “it helped me ‘develop’ not only as a specialist but also as a human being”. Implicit in this, but explicit in some of the other responses, was the sense of identity as a member of a (in some ways new) community:

… it makes all the difference, in the sense that now I feel I am in touch both professionally and personally with colleagues in the programme and that I am not going to miss anything important

It is like I suddenly became a citizen of the whole world, because I knew I could get in touch with anybody, anywhere; without it I would feel like being on a deserted island and having to do [the Ph.D.] on my own, without any help – it made me experience the benefits of working within a network.

It has kept me ‘connected’ …. I felt I was part of a group of privileged people.

Giving a sense of togetherness.

Shared ideas with supervisors … got in touch with people who take the same professional interests, applied for participation in conferences.
The intensity and lexical richness of these responses echo those of the early messages. More importantly, their vocabulary suggests e-mail to be not just a convenient conduit, but something that can have a very personal and social value for its users (in touch, citizen of the whole world, network, connected, group, togetherness).

Much documenting of the value of e-mail in language education programmes reports benefits for students’ foreign language competence and performance (Naya, 1999; Liaw, 1998). E-mail has I think brought rather different benefits to this doctoral programme in applied linguistics. Some are practical: in particular, it has helped maintain and develop the participants’ expanding range of computer skills. Other practical benefits are to do with the kind of support enabled by the underlying speed and ease of the medium: in addition to constantly staying in touch, sending work as an attachment (in some ways!) simplifies our lives; we can refer directly back to each other’s messages. Moran and Hawisher claim that e-mail’s “speed of transport and resultant rhythms of response” (1998: 84) provide a sense of immediacy (seen here in the participants’ early e-mail messages), and may go some way to countering any geographical and temporal gaps (1998: 89). (In this sense distance learning compares favourably with traditional correspondence courses.) And Moore (1991) observes that “interactive electronic media permit dialogue that is more dynamic than that between expert and learner using a recorded medium, and such programs are therefore less distant” (1991: 4). (This may also have important cognitive implications.)

There is, however, I suggest, an important non-practical set of benefits. In becoming adept users of e-mail (as evidenced here by their range of communicative purposes and flexibility of response messages), these doctoral students may have helped themselves in a variety of ways. Using the channel between their own workplace in which they were professionals and the British linguistics department in which they
were research students was, I hope, important symbolically, in that each time someone sent a message they were enacting their membership of their ‘second’ academic discourse community. Their ‘Asking For’ initiating messages meant that the participants themselves were (usually!) bringing about responsiveness. Teven and McCroskey (1996: 2) define ‘perceived caring’ in part as “… when teachers react to student needs or problems quickly”. Though the existence of the medium by itself does not ensure ‘perceived caring’, e-mail facilitates it. In ‘Telling About’ a range of programme- and non-programme-related issues, the participants can be seen as inscribing their own multiple identities on the programme, and thereby continually reconstructing these identities. More broadly, e-mail seems to have been more than a channel for requesting and for identity construction, it seems also to have broadened these students’ identities as academics working in a global academic community in which traditional boundaries are becoming fuzzier.

The ways e-mail has been used by these participants can, I suggest, tell us something about distance learning in doctoral programmes for professionals. Their messages suggest that their identities as students/professionals/academics (whose learning situations are similar to those of many people on distance programmes) are not only multiple and complex (something that needs to be recognised by those teaching on such programmes), but capable of becoming beneficially more so. In addition to showing this, e-mail seems to have the potential to facilitate it. And important things may be usefully said on e-mail that would (or could) not be said face-to-face.

None of the fourteen participants – touch wood - has dropped out of the programme, or even suspended; at the time of writing, thirteen of the fourteen have upgraded from M.Phil. to Ph.D. registration status. There are of course many reasons for this – one of which is that they now need a Ph.D. for their jobs; another is that they are very
competent and clever people, with an excellent command of English. But, as indicated by the comparison of having e-mail with ‘becoming a citizen of the whole world’, it is also the case, I think, that e-mail has partially bridged the psychological gap inherent in this distance learning doctoral programme in ways which other channels of communication would not have allowed.

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For more on this and other ‘thesis and coursework’ doctoral programmes, see http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/phd

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6386 words (excluding tables)
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Table I: Frequency of ‘initiating’ and ‘responding’ messages
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