Introduce background to study – ideas around learner isolation and learner support. Attrition rates for ODL etc. Early research (Betty Collis and Ron Oliver) into efficacy of blended approaches – CoP formation, support, relationship development, feedback provision, better quality dialogue creation through participant interaction, improved course retention rates. This presentation will background findings from a study into the use of the VC as its use moves from desktop to laptop to smartphones.
mLearning

...the **processes** (both personal and public) of **coming to know** through **exploration and conversation** across multiple contexts amongst people, using interactive technologies.

(Sharples, Sanchez, Milrad, & Vavoula, 2009, p. 5)

Emphasis on viewing mLearning as a process, rather than being defined by technologies. Note emphasis on learning as a socially-based activity, supported by technology (through exploration and conversation). Power of mTechnologies to conveniently link people to across time and contexts to learn with and from each other.
mLearning as social connection

In the mobile learning community, when a learner needs information, the learner can get it by working with others . . . (mobile) learning is less about taking in new information than it is about connecting with people who help put that information in context and suggest new ways of understanding it.

(Leung & Chan, 2003, p. 4)

Once again, the focus is on the ‘social connection’ nature of learning supported by mobile technologies. How can mtechnologies support social knowledge construction through the development of better function distance learning communities of practice, with a specific interest (for this study) in synchronous interactions? Can the synchronous, multiple media nature of communication possible in the virtual classroom assist in making a quality connection between students studying at a distance?
the ‘m’ in mLearning

...mobility is a feature of the contemporary social, political, economic, and technological world... but that which is ‘mobile’ is not knowledge or information, but is the individual’s habitus.

(Kress & Pachler, 2007, p. 28)

Challenge of mobile technologies for education lies in changing (mobilising) the habitus (Bourdieu) (enculturated patterns of learnt behaviour or expectation) of those who could benefit from their use. Increasing mobility (and the technologies which support this) has the potential to transform ways of teaching and learning, but it is not that simple... there are many other factors that impact upon our ability to realise this potential, not the least of which include institutional, structural (historical) and personal considerations (the nature of work, where and when work takes place, pedagogical views of how learning occurs, technical issues, barriers and costs etc)
Variety of mtechnologies available. Note categorisation of Netbooks as mTechnologies. Light, convenient, portable, connectable. Smartphones, ipod touches, iphones, ipads and pdas etc. Emphasis on convenience, portability and connectability. Capacity to transmit and receive information in a variety of rich media formats.
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TLRI project (2009-10)

‘Exploring eLearning Practices across the Disciplines in a University Environment’

To explore new and innovative ways of using eLearning resources to support teaching and learning at tertiary level.

Postgraduate eEducation students: PROF521, PROF522 (2008 b, 2009 a&b, 2010 b)
Undergraduate students: TEPS320 (MMP) (2010 b)

Introduce TLRI and this project as one of 4-5 others across the University. Acknowledge NZCER support.

TLRI provided an opportunity to explore the potential of synchronous multimedia communication systems in an authentic learning context. Data collected across 3 years (till end of 2010) and involving postgrad and undergrad cohorts. Describe uses for each group: 500 level two seminar presentations (initial at commencement of individual project – for formative feedback, suggestions etc) and at the end of project (to present findings and outcomes). Use tied in with assessed eLearning project. Also used for assignment discussions, question and answers, readings discussion and topic introduction. 300 level – to be used for introducing modules, professional learning group (PLG) discussions (adjunct to asynchronous forums), assignment clarification etc. Talk about times (300 level during day, 500 level on Monday nights) from home – to meet needs of working students and those studying overseas (eg: China, Korea)
Theoretical reference

Michael Moore’s Theory of Transactional Distance...

...in distance learning scenarios separation between the teacher and students can lead to communication gaps, a psychological space of potential misunderstandings between the behaviors of instructors and those of the learners...


Theoretical framework: Go over the basics of Moore’s theory of transactional distance, and its use as an ‘analytical lens’ for this study. Refers not so much to the extent of geographical distance, but to perception of psychological ‘space’ due to physical separation—student to student and teacher to student, and the impact this can have on sense of learner isolation and perception of levels of (teacher) interest and support. Link to asynchronous interaction and (eg) importance of frequency of teacher contribution to forums as conveying interest and concern for students’ views and overall learning.
Factors affecting transactional distance

Moore’s factors impacting upon transactional distance.

Course structure – the balance between flexibility and rigidity in the design of courseware, assessment etc. The extent to which course design allows for learner choice and different pathways to achieving goals, while at the same time making clear expectations and expected standards. Has a direct impact upon sense of learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy – the extent to which learners are able to ‘exert control’ over the learning process – the degree of independence and interdependence learners perceive while undertaking the course (self direction and self determination). For example, choice in when, where and how they are able to participate or contribute, work their way through course content etc. Intimately tied in with course structure.

Quality dialogue – all forms of interaction which takes place within the course, and the extent to which this helps develop (or not) a sense of ‘connection and community’ amongst learners and teachers. This refers not only to the mode of interaction (synchronous vs asynchronous) but also the quality and purpose of the interaction – how this is perceived by participants.

The balance between these 3 elements will differ for each group. It is a challenge to the eEducator to determine the best workable balance in each instance.
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Research aims

...to explore students’ perceptions of the virtual classroom in terms of any impact they considered it made on their sense of transactional distance. It concentrated on three key areas: relationship formation, knowledge development, and communication of information.
The Connect Virtual Classroom

What is the VC? Go over the layout and operation of the Virtual Classroom. Talk about the modular pod nature which can be revealed and hidden as desired. VOIP capability, AC integration, shared whiteboard, notes, chat, file sharing etc. Different ‘rankings’ can be assigned to attendees which allow them to control various features etc for presentation purposes (talk about Howard from China – voice but no video – firewalled). Play video.
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Findings:

1. Difficult arriving at balance of factors to suit all. Different priorities and preferences for different individuals (some like more structure for eg- helps in time management for eg, while others like less – appreciate flexibility and choice)
2. Synchronous verbal and video enhanced dialogue for most (immediate feedback, visual cues etc), but didn’t allow for reflective time (discouraged others from participating – ‘dumb comments’)
3. Assisted in community formation- synchronous assisted in creating greater ‘warmth’ and cohesion amongst members – additional data (video, voice) assisted in formation of sense of ‘whole person’. Facilitated change or confirmation of perceptions initially established asynchronously in forums, acted as catalyst for further informal interaction.
4. Seen as efficient for conveying logistical and course information. Saved duplication and ensured all got the same message at the same time –greater info consistency and reliability. Able to easily clarify understanding.
5. Participants indicated value of use for social purposes – study groups, informal interaction – early
6. Issues in needing to be by a computer (laptop/desktop) regularly at set place and time detracted from sense of autonomy and choice for some. Seen as ‘trade off’ (compulsory – linked to assessment). Imposition of an external ‘structure’ was inconvenient for some (away from home, away from PC, scheduled during family time etc)
7. Clear WIIFM. Value and attitude towards VC use linked closely to commonly identifiable purpose. Predominant use in this case was individual (seminar presentation) so common thread not apparent, which impacted upon engagement and participation.
8. Technical and logistical issues – access to fixed line broadband, going to schools/work to participate, security, childcare etc. Prompted need to consider a mobile solution.
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What did the findings say?

Overall summary so far. There was a close relationship between enhancing quality dialogue through the synchronous multi-mode interaction possible in the VC, the presence of a common purpose for use (WIIFM unifying ‘thread’), and internal and external structures (presence of agenda/timetable, prep notes to allow for prelim research, negative influence for some of set time and place, nature of synchronous – need for some reflective time to make informed comment etc). A balancing act.
What did the findings say?

- The classroom can assist by lessening the sense of learner transactional distance through improved dialogue, but this is dependent upon purpose (value = WIIFM) and structures (internal/external).

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• ‘Attendance’ for some was difficult for a range of reasons

(Falloon, 2010)

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Introduce intention of a limited trial of Connect on Smartphones – two groups as indicated.
Features

1. Participant video camera (one way only if smartphone only has reversed camera). Switchable between participants.
2. Text chat (to selected or all participants)
3. Screen sharing with zoom capability (to compensate for smaller screen)
4. Full classroom view – including all pods
5. Document sharing (not interactive)
6. VOIP (good quality)
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4. Full classroom view – including all pods
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