

KEEPING THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY ALIVE

Supporting situated learning with a web-based archive of email interactions

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Submitted in partial completion of the MSc degree in
Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

ASTON UNIVERSITY
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Abstract

This dissertation is a work of action research evaluating the *Aston University English Academic Subject Group Discussion List Archive** (DLA), a website created to enable Aston MSc course participants (CPs) direct access to past messages sent through the program's email discussion list (ADL). The site is based on the premise that access to an interactive, searchable database of selected academically oriented discussions benefits the MSc community in meaningful and practical ways. This paper, therefore, aims to clarify the DLA's role in supporting situated learning on the MSc by examining how CPs have used the site. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data collected over a 12 month period indicates CPs have used the site much like a reference book, primarily for interpersonal and course content support.

*The URL for the site is: <http://www.cty8.com/talandis/index.htm>

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Chapter 1: Background & Context

This chapter provides relevant background information for this investigation. Section 1.1 introduces the situation: Aston MSc CPs interacting via the ADL. Section 1.2 looks at the problem to be addressed: the inherently ephemeral nature of list discourse. Section 1.3 focuses on the response by recounting the creation of the DLA website. Section 1.4 introduces the research questions and methodology, and section 1.5 wraps up with a preview of the remaining five chapters.

1.1: *Situated learning and the Aston MSc discussion list*

"Learning is in the relationships between people, in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; without the points of contact, without the system of relevances, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part."

-McDermott (in Smith 2003)

The Aston MSc is a graduate degree program conducted at a distance and based on the concept of *situated learning* (Aston 2004), where the focus of study is on the ongoing, real-world teaching experiences of CPs rather than from decontextualized sources of knowledge (Kirshner and Whitson, in Stein 1998). From this approach, personal and professional development arise naturally as explorations of local contexts unfold. Inherent in this learning process is the need for CPs to interact, cooperate, and collaborate through a network of supportive collegial relationships. In the early days of the program, over 80% of CPs worked in lock-step study groups that met continuously via email (Mann, personal correspondence). However, as the program phased into a modular-based system in the late 1990s, this natural source of support was lost since CPs would no longer be working in groups most of the time. To compensate, an automated listserv based on *Majordomo* software (Chapman 2003) was established in 1997 to provide more opportunities for peer interaction (Garton, personal correspondence). The *Aston MSc Discussion List* aimed "to provide a point of contact for those who wish to pursue ESP/TESOL issues with participants outside their local context (Aston 2004)." After a slow start, the ADL became a key element in the Aston MSc support network (Figure 1a).

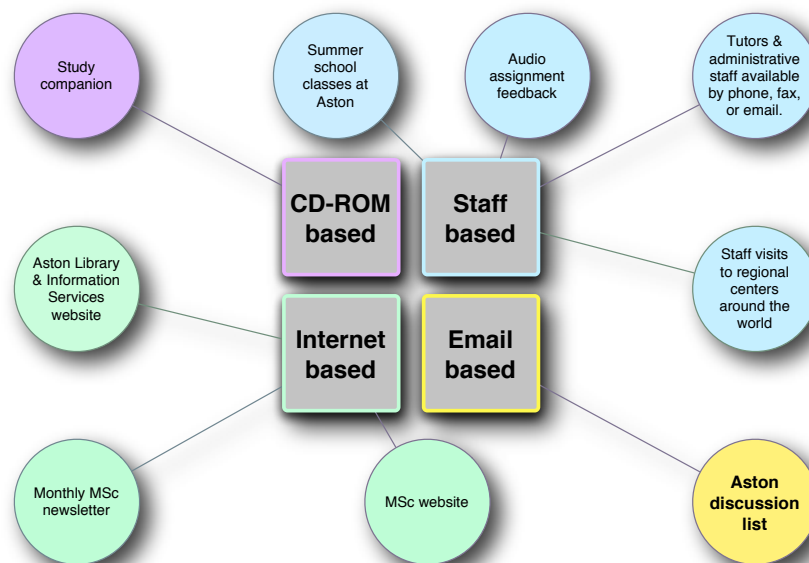


Figure 1a: Support services available on the Aston MSc (Anderson 2005)

Subscribers to the ADL receive all messages sent to the list. Likewise, posting messages enables all other subscribers to receive them. Membership to the ADL has always been unmoderated and voluntary, with the ability to unsubscribe at anytime. CPs have been encouraged to use the list in various ways, such as sharing their struggles on the MSc, reflecting on their classroom teaching experiences, and discussing issues of relevance and interest (Aston 2004). As of May 2005, 107 out of roughly 180 active CPs were subscribed, a total that includes past and present tutors (Garton, personal correspondence).

Overall, the ADL has been a well-received feature of the Aston MSc, as this user comment indicates.

What a wonderful list this is! (Those of you who've been around long enough will remember how slow it was getting off the ground). There are so many interesting discussions, ideas for research and assignments, references, teaching ideas and occasional theoretical disputes, as well as the personal experiences, humour, study tips, anxiety, commiserations, etc that make it so human and alive (Hughes 2002).

CPs have remarked that participating in email discussions has helped them feel they belong to a close-knit discourse community (Mann, personal correspondence). The process of logging on, introducing themselves, and having access to other people has led to the formation and development of friendships that have continued off-list. In addition, tutors have been impressed with the friendly yet high academic standard of the discussions.

The exchanges amongst the regulars always seem to me to have very much the tone of exchanges amongst friends, almost as if you were all working in a local group. Moreover, the academic standard of the discussions is exceptional, so I think it works reasonably well as far as it goes (Garton, personal correspondence).

Through facilitating peer interaction, the ADL has played a role in supporting situated learning on the MSc in accordance to constructivist principles of learning, helping CPs examine, test, share, and extend newly formed knowledge structures.

1.2: The "problem" with the ADL

Despite the overall success of the ADL, a major systemic problem had been its ephemeral nature (Anderson 2005), a situation caused by the inability of the service to archive contributions automatically (Mann, personal correspondence). As a result, all discussions had a very short shelf-life, benefiting only those subscribing at the time they took place. While it was technically possible to download old discussion threads from the Majordomo server, raw, unformatted text (Appendix A) is very difficult to read, let alone search in an efficient manner. A CP wanting to revisit a particular thread would have to

remember when it took place, download that month's worth of messages in one go, and then sift through extensive amounts of extraneous raw data before reaching the desired result- an impractical pursuit at best.

As a written form of communication, email carries with it the primary advantage of writing, namely qualities of permanence and objectivity (Freenberg 1989). On the ADL, this advantage was wasted as years worth of interesting and useful discourse remained virtually unavailable. This situation inhibited interaction on the list in several ways. First, the ephemerality contributed to a sense that the ADL was an underused, unvalued resource frequented by a small core of regulars. For example, if a new subscriber joined during a quiet period, the resulting *black-hole effect* (Suler 1998) could lead to confusion and frustration, as in the following case:

One thing that shocked me when I first started was the lack of people using this discussion list. After I first signed up, I waited for several days before I got any messages. I thought I had made a mistake or something. It's not a resource used extensively by more than a few regulars, which is a shame. The vast responses you've gotten show that if anyone is willing to put themselves out there a wee bit, the benefits can be great. I don't really know why this list isn't used more (Talandis 2002).

A new subscriber encountering "nothingness" upon joining the list would have no idea that years of interesting discussions had previously taken place, and that the Aston community was filled with warm, friendly, and supportive colleagues. Additionally, without access to the past, current discussions lacked context that potentially made it more difficult to actively contribute:

My first impression on joining the list was that a particular discussion was interesting, but could not be pursued because I had insufficient context. It was like tuning in on a conversation already well underway. I found myself wondering what I had missed. No doubt one is reluctant to ask questions that may have been asked umpteen times before- but that still need answering (Wolford 2002).

Without context, opportunities to revisit relevant issues and questions were lost, and along with them, the ability to build upon experiences and insights of previous CPs. The result was a discussion list that did not reach its fullest potential as a resource supporting the situated learning process upon which the program was based.

1.3: Developing an ADL archive

From early on CPs recognized the benefits of having direct, easy access to an archive of past ADL contributions, as evidenced by the practice of collecting and saving pertinent discussions on their own.

I keep a record of all the discussions related to the various modules. When I have a question regarding a certain module I can refer back to these discussions and it helps me to start working on my own ideas (Buhler 2001).

The idea of creating a resource (such as a website) that cataloged interesting and useful academic discussions in an organized and searchable manner had community support. However, due to the immense size of the undertaking, little concrete action was ever taken.

In the summer of 2003 I took on the task of creating an ADL archive for my Distance Education module assignment. Wary of the size of the project, my initial idea was to complete an investigation *about* creating such a resource, as opposed to actually making one. The primary obstacles at the time were difficulties in processing raw ADL data and learning the basics of website design. Fortunately, however, a community request for saved discussions met with a favorable response, and in September 2003 I made a simple, static website of CP-provided ADL contributions (Figure 1b).

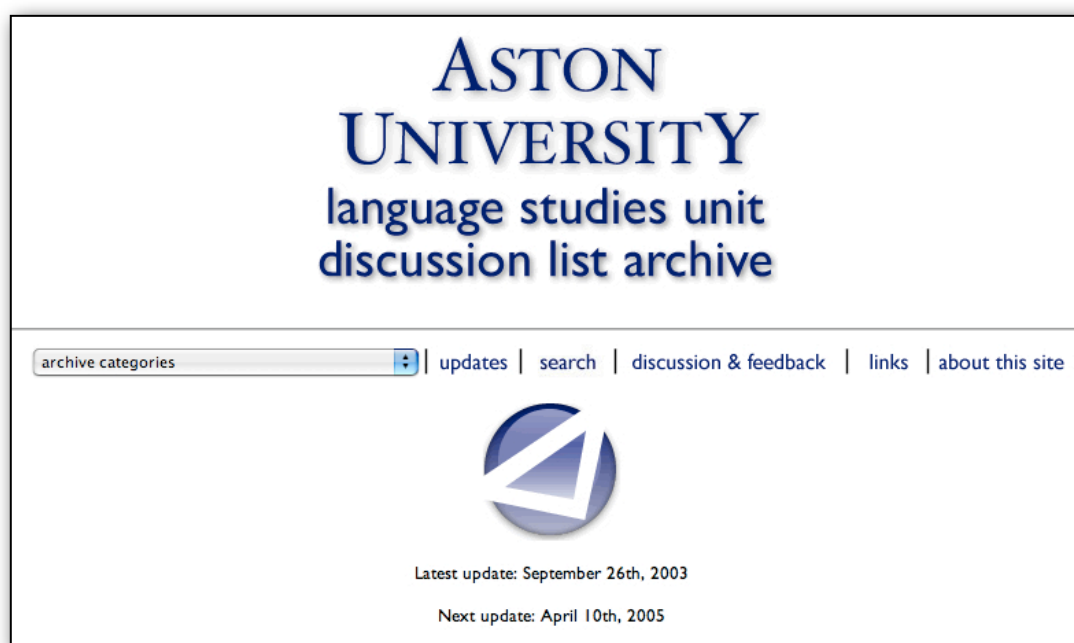


Figure 1b: Home page of the original Discussion List Archive

As an “ADL greatest hits” collection, the *Aston University LSU Discussion List Archive* featured a searchable database of discussion threads organized into module categories.

CPs responded most enthusiastically to the site's design, ease of use, and potential benefits, most of which centered on interpersonal and course content support (Talandis 2003). Ideas for improving the site were offered, noted, but left largely unimplemented as I returned my focus to completing other coursework.

1.4: *Research focus and aims*

This dissertation examines the premise that access to archived ADL contributions supports situated development on the MSc in practical and meaningful ways. Fundamentally, this study is a search for deeper understanding of how a permanent record of ADL discourse was used. By extension, I hope to draw attention to the benefits a fully realized ADL can bring to our program. To enable this research, the DLA underwent a major upgrade in April 2005. The site is now designed up to current web standards, reflects MSc program-wide changes that took place in the fall of 2004, and is set up to provide quantitative data in the form of detailed user statistics via the web metrics service *StatCounter.com* (2006). In addition, I collected qualitative data from several sources such as archived ADL discussions, personal correspondence, and *theory memos* (Borgatti 2005) I took while engaging in ADL discourse. The guiding research questions are:

- I. *What was the reaction of CPs to the DLA, and how did this feedback lead toward the development of the site?*
- II. *From a "macro" perspective, how have CPs used the site as a collective group?*
- III. *From a "micro" point of view, how have individual CPs at various stages on the MSc made use of the site?*

The questions were chosen to present the collected data from various perspectives in order to provide a multi-dimensional view of how CPs used the site. Question one focuses on what can be learned from general on and off-list feedback as well as how suggestions for improvement were implemented. Question two aims to provide a wide *macro* point of view through analysis of quantitative site visit data. Question three takes a *micro* approach by examining site usage from the perspective of individual users.

1.5: *Chapter preview*

Chapter two, the literature review, defines situated learning and examines how it takes place via discussion lists, a computer mediated form of communication largely devoid of social contextual cues. Chapter three chronicles the creation and development of the DLA, highlighting the interaction between its aims and design. Chapter four focuses

on a presentation of the quantitative and qualitative data I collected and takes a critical look at the choices I have made regarding research methodology. Chapter five presents and discusses collected data within the macro to micro framework outlined by the research questions posed in section 1.4. Chapter six summarizes the research findings, explores possible further avenues for research, and ends with discussion regarding the future of the site.

Chapter 2: The Literature Review

This chapter illuminates key underpinning concepts to orient this project within a wider body of related literature and establish a foundation for the line of reasoning I aim to follow. Section 2.1 discusses the fundamental epistemological approaches and assumptions of this research and clarifies the tradition and paradigm I am working in. Section 2.2 defines concepts of *social constructivism* and *situated learning*, and discusses how these principles characterize teacher knowledge development. Finally, section 2.3 looks at how situated learning takes place at a distance via computer mediated communication in order to highlight the sort of interaction under investigation in this research.

2.1: Epistemological approaches and assumptions

Varying interpretations exist regarding what constitutes a research paradigm, tradition, or methodology (Richards 2005). Nevertheless, sound research practice requires the underlying concepts and methodological processes be clarified so that the investigation is identifiable and the procedures made explicit (Burns 2005). I consider this dissertation a work of action research, a tradition located within the constructivist paradigm, a world view where “*social events are constructed by participants and can therefore be understood only from a holistic perspective which captures the participants’ own viewpoint*” (Richards 2005).” As its name implies, action research is intended to achieve both action and research: “*It is suited to situations where you wish to bring about action in the form of change, and at the same time develop an understanding which informs the change and is an addition to what is known*” (Dick & Swepson 1997). Since the DLA is my attempt to support the ADL (and situated learning on the MSc), I am striving for a piece of qualitative research that is “*explicitly interventionist and subjective in approach, centrally situated within the local concerns and problems of the research participants, with an aim to investigate issues of practical importance, using systematic data collection procedures*” (Burns 2005). Data will be collected from a wide variety of sources in an effort to understand unobservable, internal processes of thought and experience (Conti 1997). Emphasis will be placed upon description, uncovering patterns in the data, and giving voice to the research participants (including my own) in the process of answering the research questions posed in section 1.4.

2.2: Social constructivism, situated learning, and teacher development

“Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at hand, seeking and finding his own solution (not in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils) does one learn.”

-John Dewey (1910)

Situated learning has its roots in constructivism, the label given to a set of learning theories falling somewhere between cognitive and humanistic views (Atherton 2005). The basic premise of these theories is that an individual learner must actively build knowledge and skills, and that information exists within these built constructs rather than in the external environment (Huitt 2003). As Hein (1992) notes,

“There is no such thing as knowledge “out there” independent of the knower, but only knowledge we construct for ourselves as we learn. Learning is not understanding the “true” nature of things, nor is it (as Plato suggested) remembering dimly perceived perfect ideas, but rather a personal and social construction of meaning out of the bewildering array of

sensations which have no order or structure besides the explanations which we fabricate for them.”

Two main branches are *cognitive* and *social* constructivism (Atherton 2005). The former, developed by theorists such as Dewey, Ausubel, Bruner, and Piaget (Huitt 2003) focuses on how individual learners understand things, in terms of developmental stages and learning styles. Social constructivism, on the other hand, emphasizes how meanings and understandings grow out of social encounters (Atherton 2005). Social constructivist theorists believe that reality is constructed through human activity (Kim 2001).

Significant bases of social constructivist theory were laid down by Vygotsky in his theory of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (Atherton 2005). A ZPD is the set of knowledge just out of reach that a learner has the ability to acquire with aid from more capable *near-peer role models* (Murphy 1996). Full development of the ZPD depends upon social interaction, where the guidance gained through peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone (Atherton 2005). As Vygotsky put it, “*what a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow*” (Vygotsky, in van Lier 1996).

Vygotsky’s work is a key component of situated learning, a theory about the nature of human knowledge claiming it is dynamically constructed as we conceive of our activity within a social matrix that shapes and constrains what we think, do, and say (Clancy 1995). A central idea in situated approaches, one that has been taken up across social, educational, and management sciences, is Lave & Wenger’s *communities of practice* (Tusting & Barton 2006). In a CoP, learning is situated within a social process that occurs when people with a common interest interact and collaborate over an extended period of time (Smith 2003). According to Lave & Wenger (in Kearsley 1994), as the beginner moves from the periphery of their CoP to its center, they naturally become more active and engaged within the culture, eventually assuming the role of “expert” or “old-timer” in a process known as *legitimate peripheral participation*. Novices have their skills expanded by experts through means of *scaffolding*, a way of setting up a situation to make entry easy and successful, then gradually pulling back support as the learner becomes skilled enough to manage it (Bruner, in van Lier 1996). Through scaffolding, experts and novices progress together through the ZPD, reciprocally building shared experiences and representations (Clancy 1995). Campbell (1998) summarizes the principles of situated learning as follows:

- Learning occurs as a function of the activity, context, and culture in which it takes place
- Social interaction, cooperation, and collaboration are required

- Learning tasks and activities should be presented in an authentic context
- Scaffolding opportunities encourage the learning process

2.3: Situated learning via computer mediated communication

"Online communication is highly conducive to reflection, since to clarify writing individuals must clarify thinking."

-McMahon (in Boon 2005)

Situated learning theory has a psychological dimension in that "situated" need not imply face-to-face proximity in a physical setting (Clancy 1995). Action is situated because it is constrained by a person's understanding of his or her "place" in a social process, one that can happen globally thanks to synchronous and asynchronous forms of CMC (Hew & Cheung 2003, Markel 2001). In postmodern society, notions of "community" have grown to include those residing virtually within cyberspace (Lee 2004). On the MSc, a learning community spread across the globe, interaction takes place primarily by email, both privately between CPs and tutors and publicly via the ADL. However, at the outset it appears email has little going for it as a medium for facilitating cooperative inquiry. Erickson (1999) notes that (CMC) is cumbersome and often lacks coherence. Text-only CMC is a lean medium that relies on fewer channels than face-to-face communication, cutting off access to non-verbal information about how others are responding (Herring 1999). Without access to these channels of sight and sound, essential contextualization cues used for interpreting meaning cannot be conveyed (Gumperz, in McWilliams 2001).

Despite these seemingly insurmountable problems, however, the popularity of email and other forms of CMC continue to grow (McKelhearn 1996). In a community of practice (such as the MSc), members rely on structures of knowledge that provide individuals with ways of understanding current interaction based upon past experience (Tannen, in McWilliams 2001). Framing devices, based on a shared history, in-jokes, or other forms of affinity further aid in maintaining interactional coherence (Duranti 1986). The advantages of email make it an especially suitable medium for supporting cooperative inquiry: it's easy, flexible, fast, and can reach many people at once (Waldvogel 2001). It creates a psychological space where pairs or groups can interact within a context that allows human relationships to unfold (Suler 98). The asynchronous nature of email supports this process, allowing time for reflection and thoughtful composition of responses (Perkins & Newman 1996, Cowie 1996, Lapadat 2002, Brown 2003, Boon 2005), since the act of writing down words (as opposed to speaking them) has an effect on thought processes

(Ong, in Johnson 2003). For many experienced users, email has developed into a sophisticated, expressive art form despite the lack of non-verbal communication (Suler 1998). As Freenberg (1989) notes, many users “*have developed their compensatory literary capability to project their personality into writing.*” The result is a unique form of written verbal communication (Shapiro & Anderson, in Baron 98), and a new way of mediating social relationships (Perkins & Newman 1996).

Listservs are one of the largest genres of CMC and can be seen as the communicative organs of speech communities consisting of people with a common interest and language (McKelhearn 1996). Via software such as Majordomo, messages are forwarded from a central processor to all subscribing list members (IFLA 1999). Dialog within these groups of identified e-locutors is characterized by free and open *many-to-many* interaction (McKelhearn 1996). Central exchanges still usually take place between two main participants, but with a public audience (Baron 1998). The public nature of the discourse influences the way conversations develop. For example, as groups are usually centered on a global theme, participants are expected to stay on-topic (Herring 1999). In addition, cohesion between adjacent contributions is broken down in favor of a more complex cohesion pattern that extends over a longer discourse domain (Graddol 1989). As a result, conversations can be slow and unwieldy, with response times measured in hours or days (King 1999), or have a tendency to be a series of monologues and statements of opinion rather than an exchange of ideas (Perkins & Newman 1996:165). Rapid topic decay is thus a common problem, as participants compose responses simultaneously without knowing what others are writing, and as a result, compete with each other over the direction the discussion should go (Herring 1999, Winieki 1999).

When they work, however, mailing lists can be highly successful ventures, creating a space where people meet, exchange opinions and information, make friends, tease each other, and build feelings of solidarity and community (Nagel 1996). They accomplish this by providing true opportunities for cognitive scaffolding, collaborative thinking, and social construction of meaning (Rovai 2002). Mailing lists themselves can be conceptualized as *cognitive tools*, ones that represent a constructivist use of technology by allowing learners to represent what they know, engage in critical thinking about what they are studying, and scaffold different forms of reasoning (Jonassen 1998).

Chapter 3: An overview of the DLA

While chapter one outlined the context and problem under investigation in this report, this chapter provides a detailed examination of my response: an overview of the DLA's goals, design, and promotion. Section 3.1 focuses on the site's aims and how the design and special features support them. Section 3.2 looks at how I went about promoting the site and provides an opportunity to demonstrate how I used it to support situated learning on the ADL.

3.1: The interaction of aims, aspirations, and design

“When technology achieves something desirable without being in your face, when it knows how to integrate itself into your wishes and desires without distracting from them, that's when technology lives up to its potential.”

-Pfeiffer (2006)

The primary aim of the DLA is simple and straightforward: to provide access to selected past ADL interactions in order to support situated learning on the MSc in various ways. CPs can now engage in *vicarious learning* (Bandura, in Mayes 2001) as they observe their peers participate in discussions as learners. For example, CPs posting to the ADL often take extra time polishing and editing what they say (Mann, personal correspondence). As a result, public contributions tend to be more carefully crafted, adapted to their audience, dense with meaning, coherent, and complete than regular one-to-one off-list communication (Lapadat 2002). Reading archived discussions can potentially encourage and enhance this writing process by offering models of appropriate style, tone, and content. In addition, the knowledge construction processes of reflection and articulation are supported, as CPs can look back at the record to selectively re-read sections or copy segments into new messages, thus building on ideas generated previously (Campbell 1998, Mayes 2001). According to Lapadat (2002), this feature “*has the consequence of enhancing semantic cohesion across contributions and topics, therefore potentially increasing discursive and conceptual coherence.*”

Another chief aim of the DLA is to support active interaction with archived material. Through the site's design and special features, users are given opportunities and guidance to explore their learning environment, act on it, and transform information into new, personal meanings (Campbell 1998). As a constructivist use of technology, the DLA aims to scaffold the knowledge construction processes of articulation and reflection, potentially empowering CPs to think more meaningfully and assume ownership of what they learn (Jonassen 1998).

The structure is a three-tiered pyramidal hierarchy (Figure 3a). There is a single main entry page, with eleven category pages containing links to discussions contained on over 300 content pages. Hierarchies are quick and easy to understand (Lynch & Horton 2002), and by mirroring the MSc's organizational pattern, I could provide users with an interface matching a framework they were already familiar and comfortable with (Neilson 1990). In addition, several support pages, accessible from every page, are designed to provide background information or aid navigation. Tying everything together is a system

of links that allows users to reach any page in three mouse clicks or less. This shallow and wide (Schneiderman 2002) design provides a level of efficiency intended to enhance user control and freedom (Neilson 1990). Attention was paid to subtle design features in order to create a smooth user experience. For example, each page's color scheme corresponds to its type: sky-blue for support, yellow for category pages, and purple for archived content. Use of this common heuristic provides informative feedback (Schneiderman 2002) that helps orient users within the site. The end result, I hoped, would be an attractive site that invited use and allowed the collected wisdom and insights to shine forth.



Figure 3a: Structure of the DLA

Each page in the site provides numerous ways to access content through its four sections: the header, footer, body, and navigation bar. The *header* (Figure 3b) has direct links to each module category, a search window, and links to relevant support pages (advanced search, site map, guided tour, updates, and help).

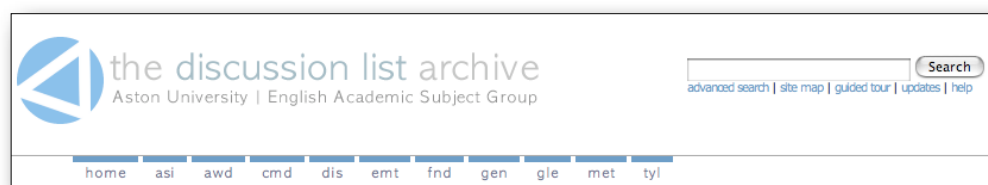


Figure 3b: DLA page header

The navigation bar (Figure 3c), located on the right side of each page, provides additional avenues of access to site content, support, and resources.

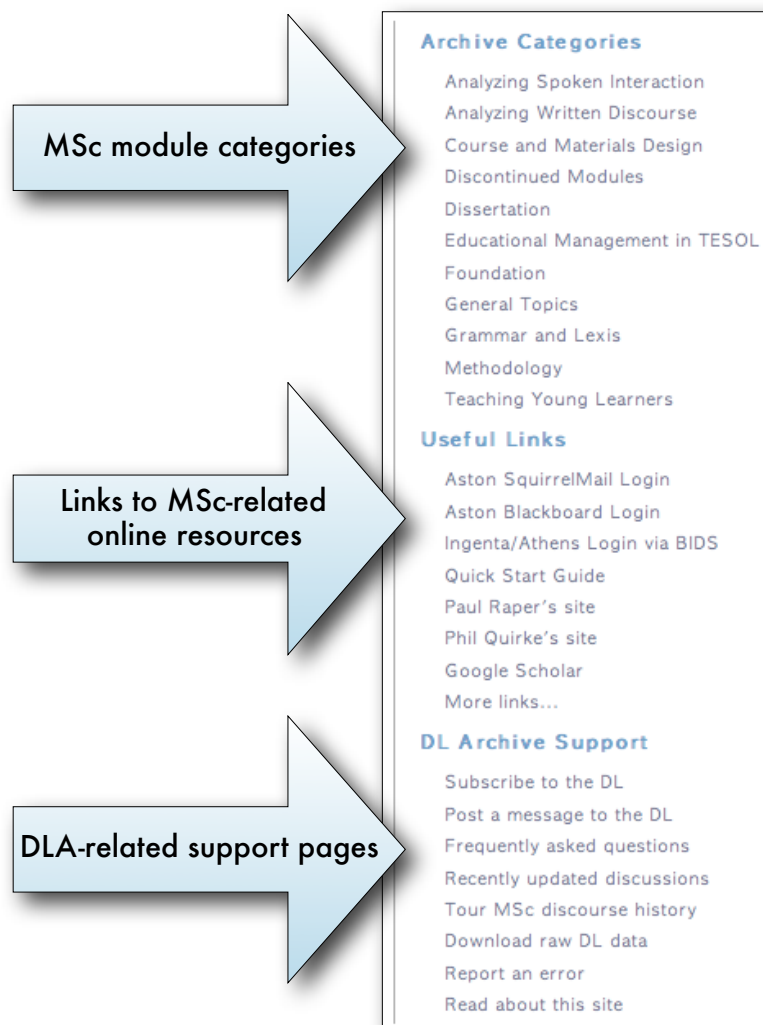


Figure 3c: DLA Navbar

There are three sets of links: first come the *Archive Categories*, with each module name spelled out for the benefit of users not yet familiar with the acronyms. The next set comprise a collection of *Useful Links* to various online resources CPs tend to frequent. For example, users can check their Aston SquirrelMail account, visit Blackboard, find articles with their Athens password, or access the other Aston-related support sites. The aim is to facilitate the user's study experience by integrating the site within a set of relevant online resources. By making these available from every page, I hope to encourage more of their use. The third set of links, *DL Archive Support*, directs users to various site-level support features, such as instructions for subscribing, downloading raw ADL data, posting messages quickly via an email link, and other types of help pages. Again, the goal is to anticipate the needs of users and provide quick and immediate solutions.

The *footer* (Figure 3d) is the third section common to every page.



Figure 3d: DLA footer

There are three elements: more links to facilitate navigation and support, a decorative quote, and technical information regarding the site's construction. Footer links are a common website feature providing additional avenues of navigation and support. The decorative inspirational quotes were elicited from CPs in order to provide opportunities for symbolically contributing to the site's design. The technical information credits the software used in making the site and indicates its compliance with current web design standards. The footer on the DLA's home page contains one additional element: update schedule information.

The *body* area of each page contains content relevant to its type. Blue support pages include information meant to provide help and assistance. For example, the home page (Appendix B) is targeted towards first time users and is written in such a way as to not assume familiarity with the MSc. The goals here are to orient users to the purpose of the site, offer an invitation to guided interaction, and provide practical ideas on how the site can be used to support situated learning. The body element of yellow category pages consists of alphabetical listings of module-related threads. Topics not pertaining to any module in particular were consigned to a general topics (GEN) category. Titles were written to reflect content, with short descriptions added to pique interest. Threads in popular categories such as GEN, Grammar & Lexis (GLE), and the Foundation module (FND) were further organized by common themes within each subject and serviced by set of quick-nav links at the top (Figure 3e).

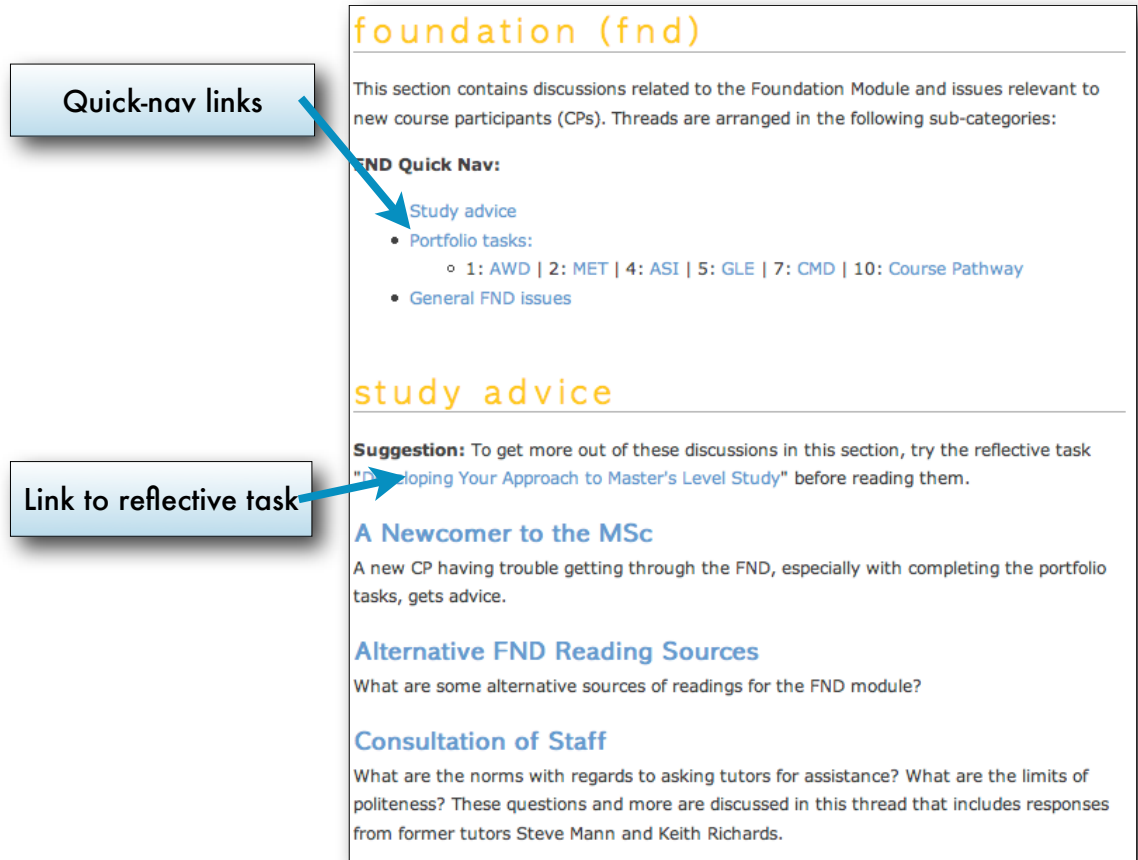


Figure 3e: Sample of the FND category page, featuring content organized alphabetically by theme

The bodies of purple discussion pages contain the actual archived content (Figure 3f). Here, stylistic choices were made to increase contrast, a vital element needed to promote legibility (Pulman, in Lynch & Horton 2002).

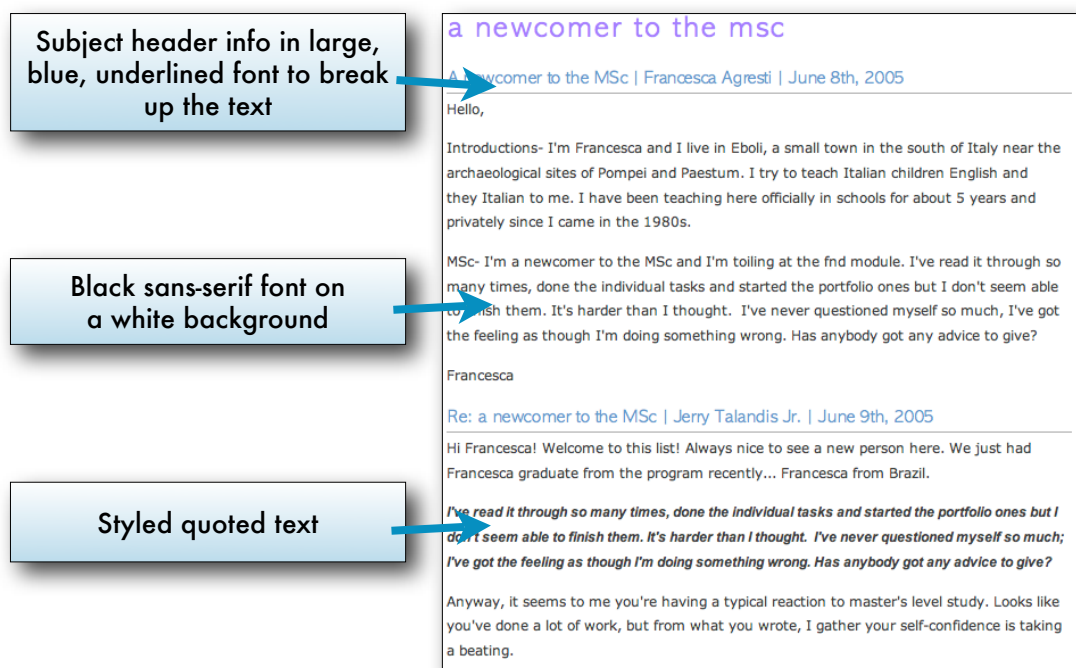


Figure 3f: Style features designed to increase readability

The guided tour (Appendix C) consists of seven reflective tasks (Figure 3g) targeted at CPs on various stages of the program and are meant to encourage private as well as public interactivity with archived content.

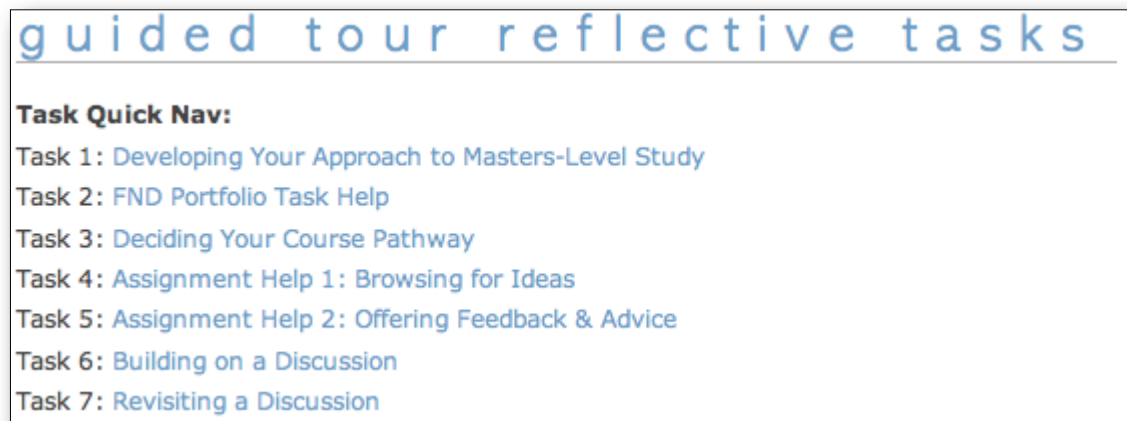


Figure 3g: DLA reflective tasks

According to McKendree & Mayes (1997), there are two essential ingredients for almost any kind of learning: first, learners must do some kind of task which tests their developing understanding and competence. Next, they must receive feedback on their performance. Neither of these is necessarily involved when users are simply given access to information, however well-structured and vivid that information might be. The DLA's reflective tasks facilitate this process and were written to resemble those found within course modules (Figure 3h).



Figure 3h: Structure of DLA reflective tasks

In each task, learners are first asked to reflect on their current state of practice. For example, in Task 1 (*Developing your approach to master-level study*), CPs must consider how to go about various aspects of study, such as assignments, time management, and information retrieval strategies (Figure 3i).

Part 1: Reflection on current practice

Take a few moments and write down a few thoughts regarding the way you approach the following aspects of studying for a masters degree:

Assignments: When do you get around to thinking of a topic for your assignment? Do you try to come up with something quickly, or do you wait until you've made your way through all the reading? What are the advantages and disadvantages to your approach?

Study time: How do you plan and organize your study time? For example, do you prefer to study a little each day, or do you like to set aside long blocks of time every week or so? What are some difficulties you have regarding study time, and how have you tried to overcome them?

Information retrieval strategies (such as note taking, keeping track of references, etc): As you read through a module, how do you go about taking notes? In addition, what's your system for keeping track of quotations and references?

Reflection: To what degree do you do the reflective tasks within the FND? Do you keep a journal, as is recommended? How keen are you on this practice?

Motivation: What do you do to get back on track when you're feeling de-motivated?

Course completion: How long are you planning on taking to finish the MSc? What are some merits/demerits of your choice?

Required reading: What books will you buy (did you buy) for the FND, and why? How did you go about deciding which to purchase?

Figure 3i: Reflective task 1, part 1

In part two, users are asked to reflectively read relevant ADL discussions (Figure 3j).

Part 2: Learning from your peers

Read the discussions in the "Study Skills Advice" section of the [Foundation module category](#). As you read, make note of anything that strikes you as interesting, useful, or lacking.

Figure 3j: Reflective task 1, part 2

Finally, in part three (Figure 3k), CPs are encouraged to articulate their reflections, either on the ADL or with me (to aid in my quest for authentic user data).

Part 3: Share your impressions

Compare your notes of the readings with your previous reflections on your current study approaches. What did you learn from reading about how others on the program approach master's level study? Additionally, was there some technique, strategy, or practice that you've found successful that others could benefit from? Post your thoughts and ideas to the [discussion list](#) or [share them one-on-one with Jerry](#).

Figure 3k: Reflective task 1, part 3

The main goal with these tasks is to help CPs develop epistemic fluency (Mayes 2001) as they strive to articulate and clarify their thinking on the ADL. Hopefully, CPs posting their thoughts would reinvigorate list usage by providing fresh takes on relevant, popular themes of discussion. New iterations of previously discussed topics could then be archived, and over time add to the depth, breath, and quality of our community's collective experience.

3.2: Site Promotion

Producing the DLA was only the beginning. For CPs to make use of this resource, I had to continuously promote it. Chronicling some of the efforts I made to raise awareness of the DLA will give me the opportunity to demonstrate how I used it as a tool for supporting situated learning on the ADL. Since the site went online in early September 2003, I strove to promote the site in four basic ways:

- Through publicity announcements in MSc related outlets
- Via an active presence on the ADL
- Direct off-list correspondence with individual users
- Registering the site with the Google search engine

Publicity announcements have appeared in various MSc outlets. For example, the site has been mentioned in monthly EASG newsletters and through word-of-mouth by tutors (Garton, personal correspondence). An introduction and description of the site has been maintained on the *Aston MSc Quick Start Guide* (Anderson 2006). Mention of it has also been made on the forum of *Phil's ESL Support Site* (Quirke 2006b).

Maintaining an active presence on the ADL has given me opportunities to promote the DLA in subtle, unobtrusive ways while allowing me to demonstrate new possibilities for ADL discourse. For example, I have often included links to relevant threads when appropriate, such as in welcome messages to new CPs. The following ADL data excerpt (Margaret 2004) exemplifies this practice:

Re: New Participant Presentation | Jerry Talandis Jr. | January 18th, 2004

Hello Margaret,

This is Jerry Talandis, from Toyama, Japan. Welcome to the discussion list (DL). It's always great to see new people come on board.

You asked about approaches to study, techniques, and materials. Everyone has the same sorts of questions when they come on board. If you haven't already, you can read past DL discussions about these topics at the DL Archive website to see what those have gone before you have done. I hope you can learn from their experiences. The FND and GEN categories are good places to start for beginners.

<<http://www.cty8.com/talandis/index.htm>>

Good luck with everything! I hope you can find some fellow FNDers to work with. But, feel free to post a question to this list anytime. You'll be surprised at how much you'll learn.

Jerry

Re: New Participant Presentation | Margaret | January 19th, 2004

Thanks for making contact. I took your advice about the DL discussion list and found it a useful resource not only for ideas, but also as a way in to using the list too.

Margaret

Here I responded to a typical self-introduction message by connecting the sender's question to the larger body of similar experience: "*Everyone has the same sorts of questions when they come on board.*" Having the DLA to back up this assertion added some power to it. The new CP could now access those experiences and investigate them for herself. Similarly, referencing previous iterations of current discussions enabled me to promote the site through demonstrating how it can be used to build semantic cohesion (Lapadat 2002). The following extract (Raper 2004) shows how I attempted to do this by responding to a new CPs question regarding course pathway decisions:

How do you choose courses? | Jerry Talandis Jr. | October 4th, 2004

Hello Paul & others,

Regarding this issue of deciding one's course pathway, it's a big one that keeps coming up. I had similar concerns as you, Paul, back in 2001 when I was doing the FND. I brought it up for discussion on this list and got lots of good advice. For those who haven't read this, go here: <http://www.cty8.com/talandis/Categories/FND/pathway.html>

This seemed to be the crux of the matter- do you start off with an "easy" module and get some momentum going, or do you jump in at the deep end and get the tough ones over with first? I chose the "easy" way, and it worked out ok. When I got to IIC (now called ASI), however, I had wished I had taken it earlier. Still, recalling the fragile state of my confidence then, I probably would have panicked at all the heavy terminology.

There's also another discussion about choosing modules at the DL Archive:

<http://www.cty8.com/talandis/Categories/FND/pathway2.html>

This one focuses more on answering deeper questions, like these posed by Raymond Sheehan:

I did wonder what sources and what principles underlie module choices and sequencing: is it a question of "I know a lot about that already, so it'll be easy?" Or the opposite "I know nothing about that and I really need/want to learn"? "I'll start off with what interests me the most" or "I'll keep what I think will be the really good stuff for last"? Or principled selection such as "Building a linguistic foundation should come before practice"? What other principles might apply?

So, Paul, how do you (or anyone else) answer these questions? Would you be willing to share some of your thinking with us? The only "correct answer" is the one that makes best sense for you, so don't be shy. If you can write out an answer for this list, you can nail that portfolio task with flying colors!

This issue was one I had raised on the ADL previously, so my first move was to include a link back to that discussion in order to provide context. Realizing that not everyone would be inclined to follow-up on that link, I added a summary of what I had learned from that conversation. Next, I went about linking to another version of this topic, and added an excerpt that asked some questions relevant to the current discussion. The aim here was to revisit the earlier iteration of this discussion and encourage CPs to build upon it. Finally, I ended my message with a pointed question to the sender, encouraging him to make his views known on the list. It was my conviction that the act of producing an act of public discourse would stimulate and clarify thought on this issue.

The practice of embedding links within messages continued off-list during correspondence with CPs as I took advantage of any on-list reference to the DLA with a personal message. I used this approach not only to provide support, but to promote the DLA and elicit feedback for it. In the following example, I responded to an off-hand DLA comment by contacting the sender directly.

Date: May 28, 2005 8:15:24 AM JST

This is Jerry Talandis. I'm an Aston course participant (CP) living and working in Japan. Welcome to the program, and to the discussion list (DL)! It's great seeing "new blood" around these parts.

I hope to be an active member of the email list, if I can think of anything useful to say! I'd better look at the archives before I go on.

You mentioned "the archives". That website, the "Discussion List Archive", can be found here: <http://www.cty8.com/talandis/index.htm>

This site is the focus of my dissertation. I'm trying to take all the messages that have been posted over the years and turn them into a study tool that supports situated learning. The discussions in the FND section are especially useful for beginners; it's a good place to start.

If it's not too much to ask, if you do one of the "reflective tasks" in the "Guided Tour" section (http://www.cty8.com/talandis/support_pages/guided_tour.htm), I'd really be interested in your feedback about it. What did you learn? How did reading past discussions help you? Stuff like that.

Again, welcome to the program. If you have any question or comment, don't hesitate to post it.

Again, my focus was not to trumpet the DLA's virtues, but to establish a relationship and use the site as a tool for providing support. Site promotion and data acquisition were therefore natural byproducts of community building outreach. The following theory memo reveals some of my thinking regarding this method of site promotion:

I'm making sure he knows how to get to the site and the reflective tasks. I'm contacting him directly because of his seeming awareness of the site. I feel I have an opportunity to make personal contact with a new CP, form a relationship, and hopefully get some data out of it!! I'm encouraged by his comment, "I'd better look at the archives before I go on." This means that he knows about the site and feels he needs to check it out before getting more involved. This shows the word is getting out, that new CPs are getting in the habit of going there to get some of their needs met. This is EXACTLY what I want- that the site becomes a place newbies can go to get "socialized" and up to speed quickly.

A final method of promotion was to register the DLA with Google during the summer of 2005. My goal here was to have the site appear whenever anyone entered TESOL-related keywords. Besides providing a bit of extra exposure for the Aston MSc, a prominent Google presence could also supply an additional means of access as CPs went about regular routines of online research.

Chapter 4: Data & Research Methodology

In this chapter I chronicle my research activities, presenting the collected data and the methods I have chosen to describe, explain, and interpret it. Section 4.1 elaborates on the research questions, making clear my intentions and data presentation strategy. The quantitative data I accumulated over a 12 month period (April 9th, 2005 - March 31st, 2006) via the StatCounter.com (2006) web metrics service is the focus of section 4.2. Section 4.3 centers on collection of qualitative data and commentary on how the research methodology I have chosen will be used for analysis.

4.1: Research question design

In short, the choices I made regarding data and methodology were driven by the research questions:

- I. *What was the reaction of CPs to the DLA, and how did this feedback lead toward the development of the site?*
- II. *From a “macro” perspective, how have CPs used the site as a collective group?*
- III. *From a “micro” point of view, how have individual CPs at various stages on the MSc made use of the site?*

These questions were designed to focus analysis and discussion on how CPs have used the DLA, thus shedding light on the nature and degree of the site’s contribution to supporting situated learning via the ADL. Question one looks at two related issues: general, overall impressions from users, and how this feedback has been incorporated into the site’s development. The evolution of successful teacher support websites depends on active implementation of user feedback and suggestions (Quirke 2006a), so this analysis will give me the opportunity to acknowledge the contributions CPs have made to the site’s growth. Continuing along a wide, *macro* perspective, question two adds a quantitative dimension by examining site user statistics collected in various categories such as page load activity, popular pages, visitor paths, visit lengths, and return visits. These statistics, while useful in providing a detailed picture of usage, are not the entire story. For added perspective, the third question focuses on a narrow, *micro* point of view through highlighting the experiences of individual users. This provides an opportunity for CPs to comment on how they have used the site beyond the level of overall impression. I hope this wide to narrow data presentation strategy will provide sufficient context for a detailed, multi-dimensional view of DLA usage and facilitate the process of evaluating its overall impact and effectiveness.

4.2: Quantitative data

StatCounter.com (SC) automatically collected, sorted, and interpreted two dimensions of user statistics: *summary stats* and *detailed user analysis* (StatCounter 2006). The summary statistics provide a perpetual count of daily site visits and can be configured in various ways to enable analysis of user trends over time. The detailed user analysis statistics consist of data on each and every pageload, enabling the ability to drill down for specific information such as location (country, region, city), host name, IP address, visit frequency and length, and various system specifications. Other features include analysis of

popular, entry, and exit pages, referral links, keyword activity, search engines used to find the site, and various technical information such as browsers, operating systems, and screen resolutions (Figure 4a).

#	FEATURE	DESCRIPTION
1	Log size	The amount of pageloads included for detailed analysis per account.
2	Configurable summary stats	A configurable display of pageload, unique, return, and first time visits to date.
3	Magnify user	Provides a detailed report on user location, system settings, referral links, and navigation paths through the site.
4	Drill down	Enables access to detailed information about each visitor.
5	Popular pages	Shows a ranking of page popularity, based on number of pageloads.
6	Entry pages	A ranked list of pages that visitors entered the site on.
7	Exit pages	A ranked list of pages that visitors exited the site from.
8	Came from	Shows how visitors are finding the site, and where they are coming from.
9	Key word analysis	Provides the keywords used to reach the site, ranked by their popularity.
10	Recent keyword activity	Real-time reporting of keywords used to reach the site, the visitors who used them, and what search engine was used.
11	Search engines	Shows which search engines have generated the most traffic.
12	Visitor paths	Indicates recent visitors and the navigation paths they took through the site.
13	Visit lengths	Displayed as percentage of visitors that stay for various periods of time.
14	Returning visits	Identifies what percentage of visitors are returning (and how many times they've returned), and how many are visiting for the first time.
15	Recent pageload activity	Displays the most recent pageloads, some details about the visitor that made them, and allows magnification for even more detail on that visitor.
16	Recent visitor activity	Similar to Recent Pageload Activity, this feature displays information on the latest visitors.
17	User location	Identifies the geographical location of visitors to the site.
18	Technical stats	Displays user ISPs, browsers, operating systems, resolutions, and % with javascript enabled.
19	Email reports	A service providing weekly emailed reports of various statistics.
20	Blocking cookie	Prevents the logging of web-master visits.

Figure 4a: Summary of relevant data analysis services provided by StatCounter (2006)

SC collects data by providing and tracking a snippet of html code placed within a site. Figure 4b shows the code I inserted into each page of the DLA.

```

<!-- Start of StatCounter Code -->
<script type="text/javascript" language="javascript">
var sc_project=628393;
var sc_partition=5;
var sc_security="ac9cb99c";
</script>
<script type="text/javascript" language="javascript"
src="http://www.statcounter.com/counter/counter.js"></script><nos
cript><a href="http://www.statcounter.com/" target="_blank"></a> </noscript>

<!-- End of StatCounter Code -->

```

Figure 4b: Website tracking code provided by StatCounter.com.

This code allows SC to gather summary and detailed user statistics in different, complementary ways. The summary stats determine site visits by using *cookies*, which are small files allowing sites to store and retrieve information on a user's machine (Brain 2006). However, the accuracy of tracking data via cookies is not without limitations. Users can disable or erase them, or they could become corrupted over time. If cookies are unavailable for whatever reason, SC counts visits as unique since there is no way of knowing if the user had visited before. This has the effect of skewing interpretation of the *Return Visits* results. For example, on March 6th, 2006 SC indicated that 86.2% of unique visitors to the DLA had visited the site only once (Figure 4c).

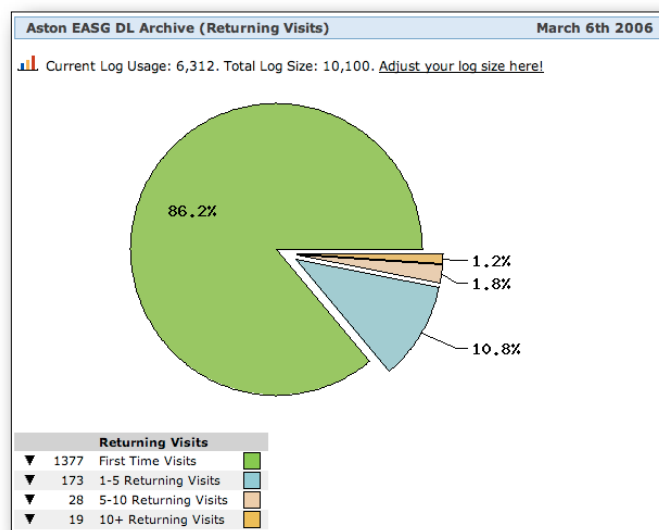


Figure 4c: Interpretation of returning visits data (based on cookies)

This figure was not precise. The *First Time Visits* stat showed a list of users with numerous entries (pageloads) and zero return visits (Figure 4d).

	IP Address	Browser	OS	Resolution	Returning Count	Entries
🔍	80.74.176.54	MSIE 6.0	Windows 98	800x600	0	136
🔍	222.10.1.75	MSIE 6.0	Windows XP	1024x768	0	111
🔍	194.125.205.31	MSIE 6.0	Windows 98	800x600	0	104
🔍	212.88.177.154	MSIE 6.0	Windows 98	1024x768	0	86

Figure 4d: Sample of users listed as having visited the DLA once

However, one user from this sample (IP address 222.10.1.75) had, in fact, visited the site more than once. Examining an extract from this user's pageload history shows several visits were made (Figure 4e). Most likely, this user had cookies disabled on their browser.

April 11th 2005	09:30:48 PM	Opening Lines of Communication www.cty8.com/talandis/categories/emt/emt_index.htm
April 25th 2005	05:24:24 PM	Alumni Discussion List No referring link
May 9th 2005	04:12:30 PM	EMT Home No referring link

Figure 4e: Extract of from user 222.10.1.75 indicating more than one visit to the DLA

SC uses Internet protocol (IP) addresses to compensate for the limitations of tracking data via cookies. IP addresses, which are unique numbers assigned to any device connected to the Internet, form the basis for the detailed analysis of each user's visit. According to SC, this method works very well for the majority, with the exception of AOL (America Online) members or any visitor using a *dynamic web proxy* (constantly changing IP address). If such a user loaded seven pages on a site, SC would record it as seven different IP addresses, thus skewing results. Both cookies and IP addresses have their strengths and weaknesses for determining the uniqueness of a visitor, and is impossible to achieve 100% accuracy when collecting user data. Over time, however, SC claims it is possible to view interesting *trends* that represent valid *indications* of how a site is actually being used. Taking these limitations into consideration, I will base observations and analysis of DLA usage on the data I have managed to collect via the SC service, using the features relevant to answering research questions two and three.

4.3: *Qualitative data & research methodology*

To present a more multi-dimensional account of DLA usage, I used qualitative data taken from two primary sources: ADL discussions and off-list correspondence. In addition, I will augment these primary sources with observations taken from theory memo entries. I am drawing upon private DLA-related correspondence as a means of filling out the picture of site usage. This correspondence consisted of elicited feedback and follow-up interviews with users of the site. Again, as with the on-list sources of data, I will call upon theory memos to provide added perspective.

To sharpen the focus and clarify the structure of my analysis and discussion, I will present the qualitative data in terms of small case studies, each one featuring a different type of user: MSc applicant, MSc beginner, and post-FND CPs. The first category features the experience of a user who visited the DLA while considering whether or not to apply to the program. The next focuses on a CP working her way through the FND module, and the final one looks at how veteran CPs have used the site.

The methodology outlined above, featuring the use of quantitative data in what is predominantly a work of qualitative action research, takes inspiration from Quirke's (2006a) assertion that for the sake of clarity and completeness of understanding, "*the researcher must adopt a multi-faceted approach using as many data sources as possible, and then interpret the data from as many perspectives as possible.*" Similar to Quirke's investigation of a website designed to support ESL/EFL teachers doing master's level study (*Ibid*), this research takes a long-term case study approach. Stake (in Mann 2002) outlines the conceptual responsibilities of a case researcher:

1. Bounding the case and conceptualizing the object of study
2. Selecting phenomena, themes, issues, or research questions to emphasize
3. Seeking patterns of data to develop the issues or questions
4. Triangulating key observations and bases for interpretation
5. Developing assertions or generalizations about the case

The object of study in my situation is a relatively small community of distance learners belonging to the same graduate program, with the specific focus of study (how CPs have used the DLA) providing the requisite boundedness. The research questions outlined in section 4.1 fulfill the second criterion. The data presentation strategy I have elaborated upon in this chapter indicates how I aim to answer these questions and use CP feedback

to triangulate observations and interpretations. Finally, any assertions I make fall within the confines of the action research tradition within which I am working, and serve my goal of evaluating the DLA and determining possible courses of future action.

In addition to Stake's criteria, Merriam's (*Ibid*) summary of the special qualities of case studies (*particularistic, descriptive, heuristic*) is useful for conceptualizing my research methodology. My case is particularistic in that it focuses on a particular situation. The collection of data from various sources over a long period of time support my aim to create a thick descriptive analysis of DLA usage. Finally, this research is heuristic in its aim to enhance understanding of the impact having access to our community's public discourse history can have.

In addition, the tradition of ethnography has had an influence on my research methodology. Ethnography, in terms of method, refers to social research comprising most of the following features (Hammersley, in Richards 2005):

1. People's behavior is studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by the researcher.
2. Data are gathered from a range of sources such as observation and/or relatively informal conversations.
3. Unstructured approach to data collection, with the categories used for interpreting what people say and do that are not pre-given or fixed. Data is initially collected in as raw a form, and on as wide a front, as feasible.
4. The focus is usually on a single setting or group, of relatively small scale.
5. The analysis of the data involves interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions and mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

Rather than create a controlled experiment, I am looking at the everyday context of how CPs have used the DLA, with raw data collected from a range of sources (as outline above). My focus is on a requisitely small group in a single setting, with quantification and statistical analysis functioning to support my descriptions and interpretations of site usage. However, *single setting* in my case refers to a *virtual* rather than physical place since CPs are spread across the globe and communicate via CMC. As a result, I have looked to *virtual-ethnography* (also known as *cyber-ethnography* or *netography*) as a way of characterizing my research methodology. Virtual ethnography, as defined by Brown (2003), is the study of online interaction and the methodology applied when researchers examine inter-

action, communication, and community online. Similar to ethnographic field-work, it involves the researcher becoming immersed in the developing online culture and gaining access to the experiences and thoughts of those they are studying. I have this requisite access given my status as a CP, but my aims do not involve studying MSc culture per se. Instead, my focus is to harness some of the insights that virtual ethnography can provide, namely great insight and depth into a range of thoughts, ideas, emotions and practices (Hine, in Brown 2003).

Chapter 5: Evaluation & Discussion

The focus of this chapter is an evaluation of collected data, with discussion situated within a framework provided by the research questions. Section 5.1 looks at general reactions to the DLA and how user feedback was implemented. Section 5.2 features analysis of site visit statistics, with section 5.3 focusing on discussion of individual user experiences in addition to commentary on the reflective tasks.

5.1: Overall reactions & site development.

I. What was the reaction of CPs to the DLA, and how did this feedback lead toward the development of the site?

I received a lot of general feedback about the DLA over the course of this project. The following comments come from two sources: an on-list discussion reacting to the site's debut (Talandis 2003) as well as personal correspondence collected from September 2003 to March 2006. To one degree or another, all comments I received about the site were positive. Some were simple statements of appreciation without elaboration.

- By the way, the DL archive is a great work.
- I've just logged on to your discussion group archive for the first time and have to say I'm well impressed. Well done on designing and producing such a useful resource!
- I would just like to say that yours is one of the few websites I cruise (as opposed to surf). I find it great and have recommended it to some of my colleagues.
- I have been browsing the site you set up and have been managing. It REALLY is amazing!! Do you have an academic background in computer science?

While personally gratifying, these sorts of comments did not provide much insight into how the site was used. Fortunately I also obtained more specific feedback, such as these comments focusing favorably on the site's design, organization, and ease of navigation.

- I found the site aesthetically pleasing- it even had a calming effect on me! (the baby blue maybe??)
- Anyway, the good news is that I love your site: it's straightforward, attractive and very effective. I've been around it and like everything I saw. Congratulations! It is genuinely very rare to find something so easy to navigate and so clear to read.
- On the whole I found that the way the archive is organized is well thought out and user friendly. Each time I used it it took me only a few minutes to find what I was looking for. The topics seem to be well selected. The fact that I did get answers every time I visited speaks well for its variety of topics, and the range is satisfactory.
- I very quickly found a number of exchanges that were of interest- that in itself is extremely praiseworthy. It is clear and easy to use. It's also an insight into how useful the list can be.
- I suffer from computer phobia but nevertheless found the site very, very simple to use. That was the most important thing because I felt encouraged to use my computer to enter discussions, or at least to revisit the site and read some more. Great to have it organized by module and then by topic within the module. Also great to have a

'search' as I typed in a specific topic and found that there was something in TDA about it as well as GE where I originally looked.

- Nice job on the archive, it's quite easy to find things- even when you don't know what you're looking for!

The fundamental organizing principle was to meet the needs of the MSc community. I wanted to create a site that was accessible, user-friendly, and aesthetically minimalist in design (Neilson 1990), one that allowed users “*to quickly see the breadth of their options, grasp how to achieve their goals, and do their work*” (Tognazzini 2003). Keeping in mind that “less is more,” the idea was to present archived threads clearly in a straightforward, efficient manner. That CPs could easily access past interactions confirmed a core aim of the site had been met, with the time and effort spent on sussing out organization and design issues having paid off.

Other specific feedback noted the DLA could provide course content support, especially for new CPs.

- Participants who are new to a module will find it a great help in orientation and getting down to finer points that others who have gone before may have encountered. Since being on the list only since March this year, I was concerned about how I could make use of all the messages & notes that have been flying around. I have read some very significant things and thought that it would be a shame to not have some system to make permanent use of the mailing list.
- Your website is great! I received it this morning and it made for stimulating reading- I'm in the midst of completing the FND module and I found the sections on the portfolio tasks extremely useful. The archive is a good place for me (and others like me) to read about former CPs' queries and frustrations.

Reading past discussions could provide more than course information; It was also noticed that the collected experiences act as a scaffold (Bruner, in van Lier 1996:195), providing support for new CPs as they socialize into masters' level study.

- It would be great for participants starting new modules to read through the discussions before they start. I guess it is almost an example of scaffolding in that creating this kind of framework makes it more accessible for study? Your efforts have shown how a discussion list of this kind can offer not only interpersonal, but also course content support!

This “interpersonal support” was another commonly cited benefit. The DLA was regarded as a tool that could help ease the initial anxieties CPs face when beginning their studies. According to O'Reagan (2003), online study can present a disorienting situation where the familiar frameworks and markers of everyday life and learning no longer exist, or at least exist in unfamiliar forms. As a result, one of the biggest challenges facing dis-

tance learners is overcoming negative emotions that inhibit learning. As Cowan (1995:17) notes, one of those challenges is isolation: “*due to the absence of social links, the distant learner does not have the same opportunity to be aware that the difficulties which she or he is encountering are shared by others.*”

- Often, the benefit may have less to do with what information there is on the list and more to do with affective factors- it may have more to do with hanging on in there, persevering despite the distance-learning difficulties because we can see how other CPs have worked things out.
- I think I would have used the archive first of all just to not feel alone! I would have clicked on the module I was working on, and browsed through everything that everyone else had written about it. I imagine that any worries, questions etc. I might have been having probably would be covered- even if there weren't 'answers,' it's nice to know one is not alone. Then reading into the module a bit, I probably would have checked it again when questions/ideas etc cropped up, just to see what was out there. That's just the instant vision I had when I saw the site.

As the comments above indicate, CPs believed access to past ADL contributions could provide support for the cognitive and affective domains of learning through enabling a process of vicarious learning (Mayes 2001).

CPs also asked questions and offered suggestions for improvement. Much of this feedback was subsequently implemented as the site grew and evolved. For example, one issue when the site first went online was how to manage the amount of discussions archived on popular category pages:

- Is it possible that discussions get so long or so numerous as to make it hard to sort through for both the editor and users?

This comment led eventually to the current strategy of organizing threads around common themes serviced via *quick-nav* links at the top of category pages. These links also provide a visual outline of page contents. For example, the GEN category page, a virtual dumping ground for discussions not relating to any particular module, was a prime candidate for revision. By grouping topics with two or more iterations together, the page evolved from a simple alphabetical listing of discussions to one more easily navigable at a single glance (Figure 5a). With this arrangement, contents can continue to grow with the page retaining its overall accessibility.



Figure 5a: GEN category page quick-nav links reflecting the reorganization of page contents

Similarly, another comment requested that a special page be created to serve the needs of new CPs:

- How much of a pain would it be to add a section on study skills or study tips or something like that? That's one thing I think I would have liked to have read about when I was starting out...how do other people go about doing this thing- taking notes, finding articles, reading the modules, keeping it all organized, time management tips?

As a result of this feedback, all relevant discussions were gathered to the FND category page and organized by clearly identified themes reflecting the needs of beginners. In addition, links to corresponding reflective tasks were added to facilitate access and encourage their completion. However, insight into *how* the site was actually used could not be determined from the general comments alone. In the following sections, I will focus on this issue, looking first at some quantitative data and then at commentary from individual users.

5.2: Macro perspective of site usage

II. From a "macro" perspective, how have CPs used the site as a collective group?

Figure 5b shows a monthly summary of DLA user statistics. The green bars represent total pageloads, while the blue and orange bars stand for unique and returning visitors, respectively.

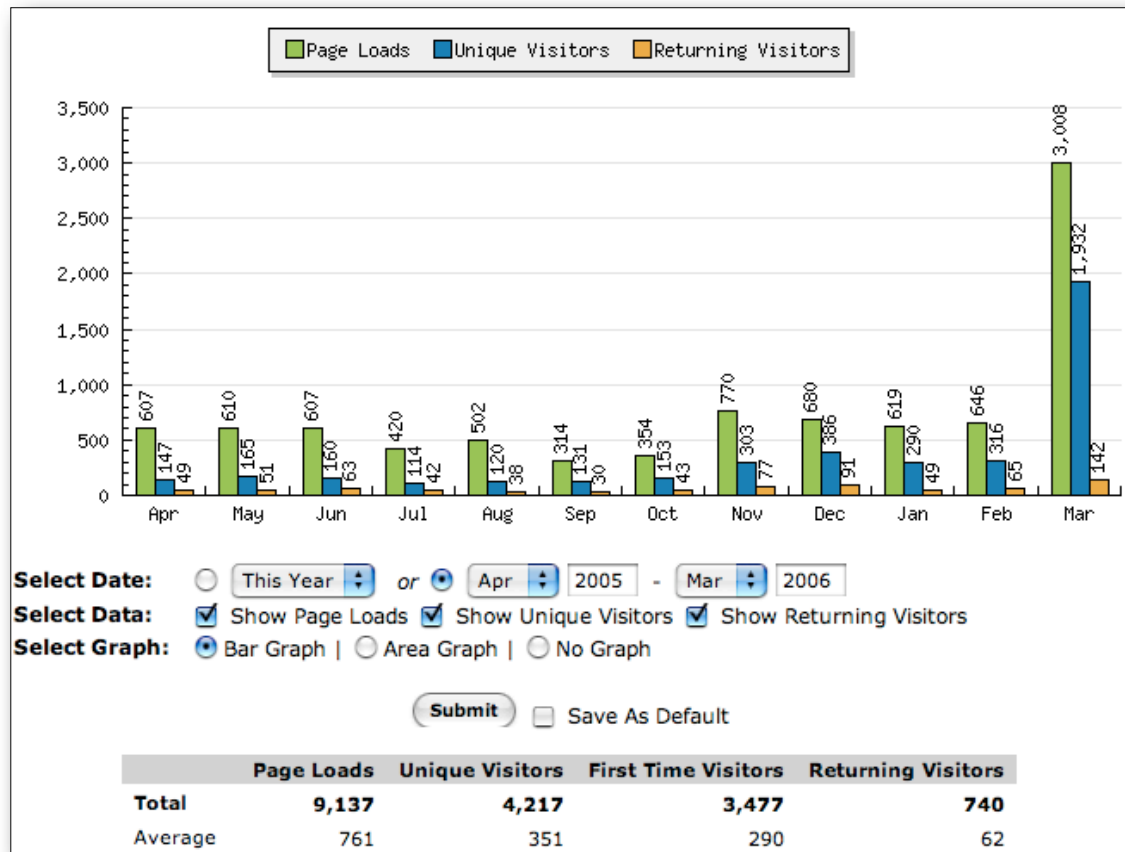


Figure 5b: Summary of monthly user statistics (April 9th, 2005-March 31st, 2006)

A total of 9,137 pageloads were recorded, for an average of 761 per month. Activity remained virtually identical during the first three months, dipped during the summer, picked up again in the fall, and ended with a substantial surge in March 2006. One possibility for the summer dip could be that practicing teachers, the target audience, often take breaks during that time. Traffic picked up again in the fall, perhaps reflecting a return to work and study. There were 4,217 unique visits. Approximately 18% of visitors accessed the site more than once, a figure that is most likely a bit higher.

A closer look at site visits (Figure 5c) reveals that only 9% of visitors had returned to the site, but again this number is actually higher. Nevertheless, a vast majority of users made only one visit. Drilling down into the 10+ *Returning Visits* category reveals that the most frequent users averaged about two visits per month over the course of the year.

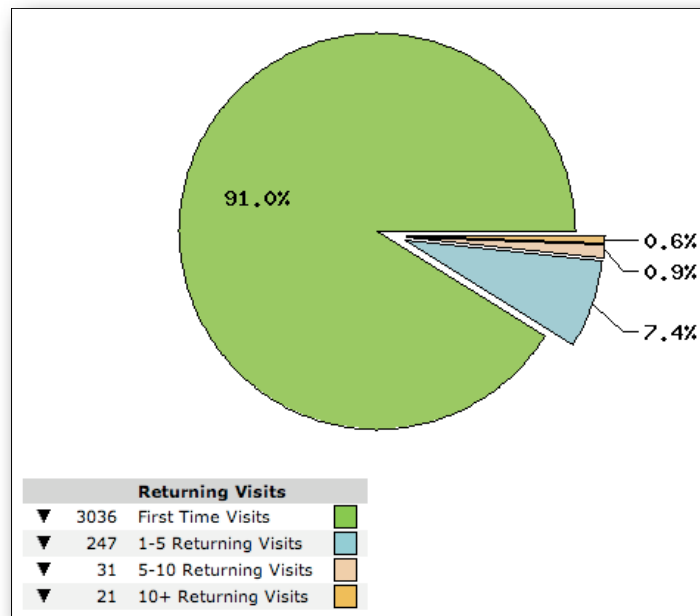


Figure 5c: Breakdown of returning visits

From these numbers it appears the DLA was used much like a reference book, pulled off the shelf from time to time when need be. A look at the *Visit Length* stats confirms this analysis (Figure 5d).

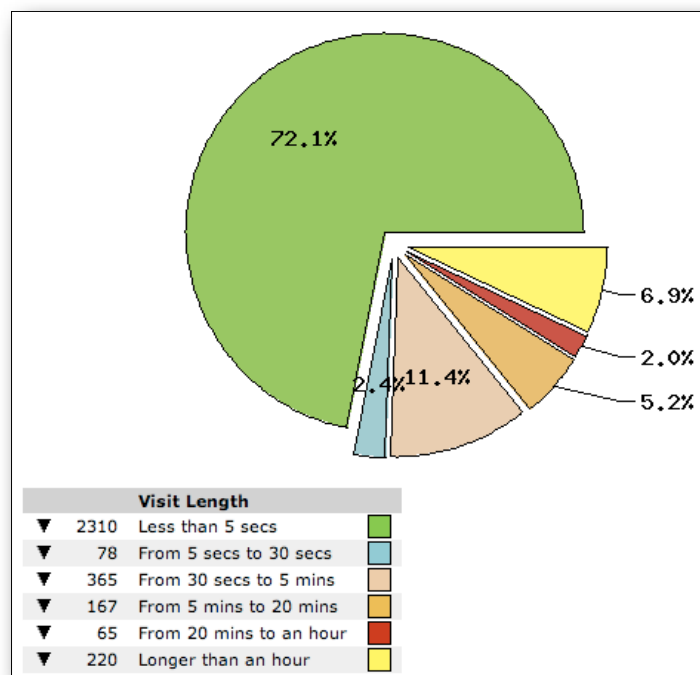















Figure 5d: Breakdown of visit lengths

SC determined visit length by measuring the time difference between the entry and final exit page. If only one page was accessed, the visit length was recorded as zero since the entry and exit pages were identical. About 72% of visits fell into this category. The actual visit time could vary- short, for example, if a non-MSc user visited during a web search

and quickly moved on, or longer if a CP needing specific information accessed a page directly and spent a bit of time only there. 19% of visits lasted between five seconds and 20 minutes. Again, this suggests a variety of usage scenarios, such as encounters via search engines, quick in-and-out searches for specific information, or general browsing around to get a gist of the site's contents. Nearly 9% of users made visits upwards of 20 minutes. In general, the longer the stay, the more likely they were affiliated with the MSc.

The significant traffic spike in March 2006 was a highly unexpected result. In one month, pageloads increased by 465%, unique visitors by 611%, and return visitors by at least 219%. What accounted for this sudden and dramatic surge in traffic, and what implications does it have for the MSc? Data indicates that the rise resulted from a sharp increase in the number of non-MSc people visiting the site via Google word searches. The following *Search Engine* data extract exemplifies this phenomenon (Figure 5e).

Country	Host Name/Web Page/Referring Link
 Korea, Republic Of	(125.248.244.2) DL Archive Home No referring link
 United States	adsl-158-210-206.asm.bellsouth.net (68.158.210.206) Is Grammar Innate? www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&q=is+grammar+innate%3F&btnG=Search
 United States	WK18-144.LEWISWEB.NET (216.162.144.18) Reference Citing 2 No referring link
 Korea, Republic Of	(61.43.215.201) Concordance & Collocation Resources www.google.com/search?q=collocations%2Bdo%2Bmake%2Btake%2B
 China	(218.63.94.178) %u53EA%u6709%u82F1%u8BED%u6559%u5BA4 translate.google.com/translate?hl=zh-CN&sl=en&u=http://www.cty8.com/cache-mtc-ad08.proxy.aol.com
 United States	(64.12.116.202) Dissertation Organization No referring link
 United Kingdom	user-1627.lns3-c7.dsl.pol.co.uk (84.65.198.91) Schiffrin & Approaches to Discourse Analysis www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=conversation+analysis+activities&lr=&btnG=Search
 United States	user-0cdfne.cable.mindspring.com (24.215.222.238) Terminology for Hedging Words www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&q=lori+solbakken&btnG=Search
 United States	user-0cdfne.cable.mindspring.com (24.215.222.238) Business English Texts? www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&q=lori+solbakken&btnG=Search
 United States	(65.114.16.94) Dissertation Organization www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&q=case+study+dissertation+length
 New Zealand	otaki.student.vuw.ac.nz (130.195.220.23) No referring link
 New Zealand	otaki.student.vuw.ac.nz (130.195.220.23) Teachers Using L1 in YL Classes www.google.co.nz/search?hl=en&q=re-examining+english+only+ESL+classes
 Chile	139-112-223-201.adsl.terra.cl (201.223.112.139) Correcting Interlanguage www.google.cl/search?hs=IJU&hl=es&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla

Referral links from Google

Figure 5e: Sample of recent pageload activity featuring numerous hits via Google (March 21st, 2006)

Of the 13 pageloads featured in this extract, ten of them indicate access via Google. However, since visitors were accessing the site via search engines prior to March, the

question remains- why the sudden surge? The main difference is that from March 2006 the DLA began regularly appearing on the first page of many TESOL-related searches. When a website appears in this prime position, it is more likely to receive traffic (Woodhead 2006). In addition, the suddenness stems from the fact that increased traffic does not become noticeable for months after initial registration of a site with Google (Morris 2006). The *User Location* statistics reveal that 1,062 pageloads came from 69 different countries (Figure 5f) without CPs during at least the past two years (Garton, personal correspondence), amounting to approximately 12% of total traffic.

COUNTRY	#	COUNTRY	#	COUNTRY	#
Australia	142	Russia	12	Bangladesh	4
Philippines	109	Peru	12	Costa Rica	3
Singapore	73	Sweden	11	Macao	3
Egypt	55	Bahamas	9	Lithuania	3
India	55	Norway	8	Sri Lanka	3
Argentina	50	Finland	8	Saint Lucia	3
Iran	48	Venezuela	8	Jordan	3
France	37	Croatia	8	Romania	2
Israel	35	Jamaica	7	Nepal	2
Czech Republic	24	Syria	7	Guam	2
New Zealand	23	Trinidad & Tobago	7	Guyana	2
Sudan	2	Slovenia	7	Macedonia	2
Morocco	19	Ethiopia	7	Sudan	2
Pakistan	19	Lebanon	6	Kyrgyzstan	1
Colombia	18	Panama	6	Bahrain	1
Senegal	17	Mauritius	6	Ecuador	1
Uruguay	17	Zimbabwe	5	Liechtenstein	1
Nigeria	16	Cyprus	5	Bermuda	1
Brazil	15	Ghana	5	Puerto Rico	1
Chile	15	Kenya	5	Georgia	1
Yemen	15	Tunisia	5	Albania	1
Oman	15	Serbia & Montenegro	4	Honduras	1
Denmark	14	Moldova	4	Iceland	1

Figure 5f: Pageloads from countries without CPs in at least the past two years

Most of these visits were short, usually of one pageload in length. Figure 5g shows a visit profile from such a user. This person (from Iran) accessed the *Sinclair's Idiom Principle*

Number of Entries:	1	Returning Visits:	0
Entry Page Time:	March 20th 2006 03:39:17 PM	Location:	Fars, Shiraz, Iran, Islamic Republic Of
Visit Length:	0 seconds	Hostname:	(80.191.125.101)
Browser:	MSIE 6.0	Entry Page:	Sinclair's Idiom Principle
OS:	Windows XP	Exit Page:	Sinclair's Idiom Principle
Resolution:	1024x768	Referring URL:	www.google.com/search?hl=fa&q=Sinclair concordance

Figure 5g: Profile of non-MSc user visit.

discussion page on March 20th, 2006 by typing a search inquiry into Google (*Sinclair concordance collocation*). Since only one page was accessed, most likely the visit was short, but again, there is no way to know for sure. Clicking the *Referring URL* link reveals the page of search results (Figure 5h) and shows how the DLA was found.

وب تصاویر گروهها فهرست

بیباب جست و جوی بیشترت
تنظیمها

Sinclair concordance collocation

Google™

وب یافتہ 1 - 10

Bibliography of Collocation and Concordance related books
Sinclair, J. (1991). Corpus **Concordance Collocation**. Oxford University Press. Sinclair, J. (1997). Corpus Evidence in Language Description. ...
www.nsknet.or.jp/~peterr-s/concordancing/bibliography.html - 9k
نخبره شده - صفحات همسان

Concordance & Collocation Resources
Sinclair, J (1991) Corpus **Concordance Collocation**, Oxford University Press. Sinclair, J (1997) Corpus Evidence in Language Description, In Wichmann, ...
categories/gen/concordance_resources.htm - 24k
نخبره شده - صفحات همسان

Sinclair's Idiom Principle
Biber et al., and Sinclair's "Corpus, **Concordance, Collocation**" (which offers a radically different "lexical" classification). D'you know of anything else? ...
www.cty8.com/talandis/categories/gle/sinclair_idiom.htm - 13k
نخبره شده - صفحات همسان

Two DLA discussions appearing in the top three search results

Figure 5h: DLA appearing on a page of search results of a likely non-MSc user

Two DLA discussions appeared within the top three search results, with the user from Iran accessing the second of these. Other likely non-MSc users, especially from countries such as Australia, Philippines, and Egypt, have spent time browsing around the site, even making return visits. This indicates at least some interest in the site's content and is evidence the MSc is gaining exposure beyond the program. While some of these users could have a possible connection with the MSc, it is clear most do not. Thus there seems to be a promotional aspect to the DLA, with people around the world now able to access and read ADL discourse. This phenomenon underscores the power of prominent placement on search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and MSN. Figure 5i indicates that approximately 26% of total DLA traffic originated from search engines, with Google in the lead at about 67%.

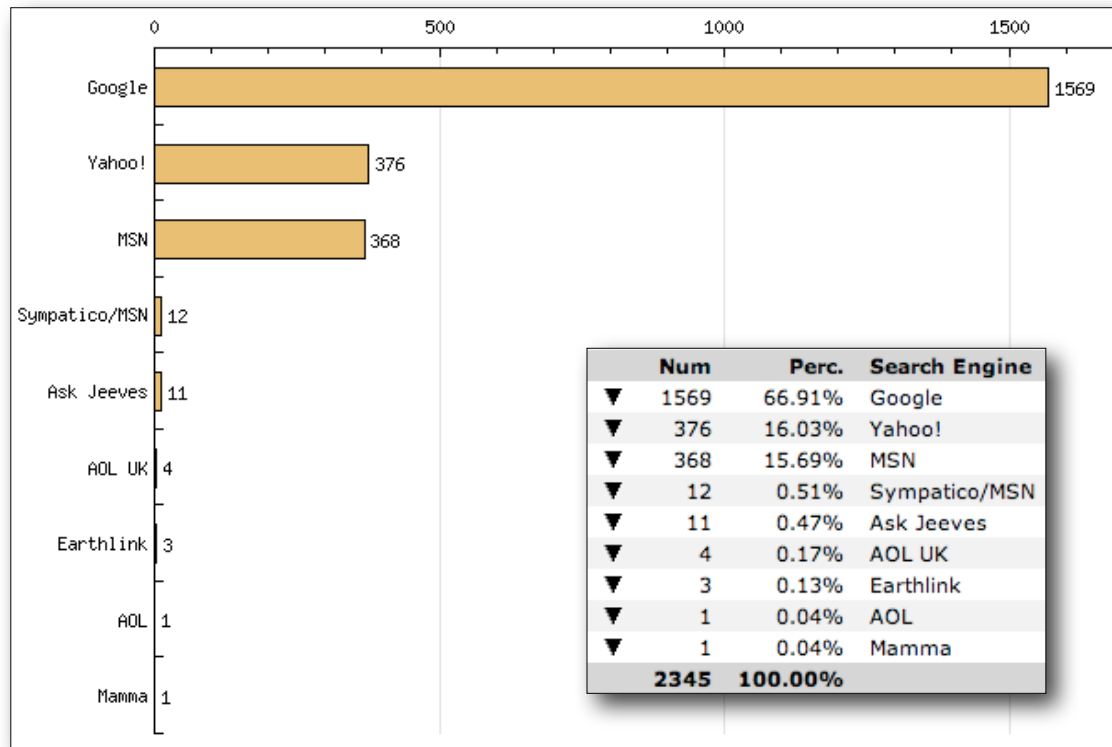


Figure 5i: Breakdown of search engines used to access the DLA

Reflecting the growing trend of Internet-based research, these statistics are not surprising as more and more TESOL researchers are taking advantage of the power and convenience afforded by search engine technology. By virtue of the DLA, the MSc discourse community is now more fully integrated within the worldwide network of public TESOL discourse. So, in addition to making ADL interactions more accessible to CPs as they go about their normal online research, the DLA acts, in effect, as a de-facto publishing medium. This changes the dynamic within the ADL, as messages posted to the list for the benefit of a small learning community now have a potential world-wide audience.

Whether or not this is a welcomed consequence of the site is a question that can be taken up in further research. Regarding site design issues, this increased non-MSc traffic offers opportunities for improving how the Aston MSc is presented. While the DLA is not a promotional tool per se, given the large numbers of visitors from outside the program, it makes sense to capitalize on this exposure by clarifying what the site is all about for the non-MSc audience. Future updates will need to make changes by incorporating language and features that introduce and provide access to the MSc more clearly. Currently only the main home page has any sort of information on the program, but this is insufficient given the fact that many users do not enter the site this way. Perhaps the header and footer spaces on all pages could be utilized better to provide more background information on the program and include relevant Aston-related links.

If data indicated the DLA was used somewhat like a reference book, which parts were read most, and what does this information reveal about how visitors used the site? Figure 5j shows a list of the top 20 most accessed pages.

RANK	WEBPAGE	#LOADS	CATEGORY
1	DL Archive Home	976	Support page
2	FND Home	339	FND
3	MET Home	296	MET
4	GLE Home	270	GLE
5	ASI Home	207	ASI
6	Updates	195	Support page
7	CMD Home	186	CMD
8	AWD Home	169	AWD
9	EMT Home	159	EMT
10	TYL Home	149	TYL
11	DIS Home	128	DIS
12	GEN Home	107	GEN
13	DL Archive Tour	103	Support page
13	Dolch Word Lists	103	TYL
15	Dissertation Organization	102	DIS
16	Observer's Paradox	91	ASI
17	Pennycook & Cultural Imperialism	86	FND
18	Site Map	82	Support page
19	Helen Doron Method	79	TYL
20	Grammar Analysis	75	GLE

Figure 5j: Top 20 most accessed DLA pages

Color indicates page type: blue for support, yellow for category, and purple for archived discussion. The colors highlight what seemed to be a typical and logical usage pattern: visitors entering via the main page tended to spend time browsing the various module categories which served, in practice, as the site's "table of contents." Three other support pages, all designed to facilitate navigation, were also among the site's most popular, indicating that visitors were making use of the help information available. Among the category pages, FND was accessed the most, supporting the notion that the site is beneficial to new CPs. Interestingly, GEN was accessed least among all the category pages, indicating that users seem to value topics related to specific modules more than gaining knowledge on general issues. Analysis of which discussions were most popular among CPs is

problematic given the large amount of non-MSc traffic. For example, did the appearance of two *Teaching Young Learners* (TYL) discussions in the top 20 reflect interest amongst CPs or from the wider community of interested users? Analysis of traffic to this page suggests the latter, so it is not possible to clearly determine which topics interest CPs most. All told, the prominence of the category pages suggests that browsing is a primary behavior amongst site visitors.

5.3: Micro view of individual visits

III. From a "micro" point of view, how have individual CPs at various stages on the Aston MSc made use of the site?

In this section I introduce some personal reactions of CPs as they used the DLA. As outlined in section 4.3, I will organize my presentation around three categories of users: MSc applicants, MSc beginners, and post-FND CPs, then wrap up with commentary regarding the reflective tasks. All comments in this section are used with permission.

I met Mari Nakamura at the 2005 JALT conference in Shizuoka, Japan. During our conversation the subject of graduate studies came up. Mari indicated her strong interest in pursuing a masters via distance learning, so I recommended the Aston MSc and told her about the DLA during subsequent email exchanges. She visited the site and sent me some feedback from the perspective of a potential MSc applicant:

I've been having a good time visiting your site. Here's a bit of feedback. Prior to viewing the site, I was not sure if the MSc Program at Aston Univ. was workable for me. Some of the reasons for this uncertainty and anxiety were:

- I was not sure what kind of support the program would offer during the study.
- I was afraid that there might not be enough interaction among the course participants, and this might make me isolated or helpless sometimes.
- I didn't know what the modules were exactly like.
- I was not sure if my English ability and knowledge as a teacher are up to the challenge of the study.

The “uncertainty and anxiety” mentioned here reveal a common frame of mind among teachers looking to extend their qualifications via graduate study. Doubts and fears about course content, support, and distance learning in general must be considered natural reactions of anyone engaged in the search for a compatible school. In Mari’s case there were additional questions about her status as a non-native English speaker.

And after cruising your site, I realized:

- That the Aston Univ. has a very thorough support system, including the library and interaction with the tutors through e-mail.
- That the course participants have created a 'learning community' through the site.
- That the site is very easy to navigate. Particularly the summary attached to each thread was extremely helpful in locating the topics that I want to explore.

And the best feature for me was the link to the 'ESL Support Site' organized by Phil Quirke. I could see the first unit of each module, which I have never imagined to be possible. I was fascinated by the content, and actually spend couple of hours browsing through the units.

And Jerry, I was very much inspired by some of your posts. You said somewhere that you have a faith that things will work out for you if you keep on working hard even if the teaching environment in Japan is not favorable for middle-aged and more experienced teachers.

Thank you, Jerry, for telling me about this MSc Program. I am almost decided on taking the TEYL program. I just need to spend a little time to cool myself down and make sure that this decision is right for me and my family.

For Mari, interacting with archived DLA content provided a measure of emotional relief and assurance. She was able to confirm the presence of adequate support, receive a bit of inspiration from the MSc community, and access Phil Quirke's site (2006b) for excerpts of actual course modules. Based on these comments, the combination of reading ADL discourse and previewing course content provided a clear view on what enrolling would entail and helped support her decision making process.

To gain further insight into Mari's experience of using the DLA, I extracted data from her first two visits, analyzed it, then had her comment on my analysis. Figure 5k chronicles her first visit.

#	TIME	PAGE VISITED
1	07:38:27 pm	DL Archive Home
2	07:38:50 pm	FND Home
3	07:39:18 pm	A Newcomer to the MSc
4	07:43:42 pm	TYL Home
5	07:44:28 pm	DL Archive Help
6	09:29:24 pm	TYL Home
7	09:30:38 pm	Reading Aloud to Children

Figure 5k: SC data of Mari Nakamura's first visit to the DLA (October 31st, 2005)

Mari's nearly two hour visit began at the main home page where she read a bit of the introductory text to get an idea of what the site was about. Her first reaction was one of slight disorientation.

Well, I have to say that I was a bit confused at first. Probably it is my English. Most of the abbreviations (e.g. asi, awd) presented at the top of the pages were unfamiliar to me, I got stuck there. After reading the explanations on the page, I got the idea.

Based on the other six pages she visited, Mari's was primarily interested in two topics: FND and TYL. At the FND category page (#2) she got a content overview by reading the short discussion introductions. One of them (*Newcomer to the MSc*) caught her eye. As Mari confirmed, at the time she was seriously considering the MSc and wanted to gain insight into the experience of someone close to her situation. Her next step was to visit the TYL category page (#4), but after less than a minute there she made an extended visit to the Help page where she spent about 1:45 reading the extensive *Frequently Answered Questions* section.

I was confused with the structure of the site, and wanted to see something like a site map. The Site Structure section on this page helped me out of the confusion. I got the info that I wanted. Bingo!

After getting the answers she needed, Mari returned to the TYL page (#6). After scanning the short list of threads there she chose the *Reading Aloud to Children* discussion, where she was able to find some useful information:

The editor (is it you?) showed an excerpt from the dialogic reading page at Reading Rockets. I have never heard of 'Dialogic Reading', and it interested me. After reading the article by visiting the site, I figured that it was the technique that I had been using without noticing what exactly I was doing. This happens to me often, and this is a great way to reflect upon my teaching. I am going to forward this article to my teacher-friend who also must be doing the same without evaluating its effect on child's learning. I even thought, 'Oh, I might be able to include this in my future presentation!' You'll see!

Mari's second visit was much more extensive, consisting of 37 pageloads over a span of seven and a half hours (Figure 51).

#	TIME	PAGE VISITED
1	01:59:46 pm	DL Archive Home
2	01:59:57 pm	Updates
3	02:01:46 pm	Getting Old in Japan
4	02:08:41 pm	Updates

#	TIME	PAGE VISITED
5	02:08:57 pm	Conducting Email Questionnaires
6	02:09:27 pm	Updates
7	02:09:52 pm	Alternative FND Reading Sources
8	02:12:18 pm	Updates
9	02:12:36 pm	ASI Home
10	02:12:52 pm	AWD Home
11	02:12:58 pm	CMD Home
12	02:13:02 pm	Authenticity
13	02:13:53 pm	TYL Home
14	02:13:58 pm	Dolch Word Lists
15	02:15:07 pm	TYL Home
16	02:15:10 pm	Educenet
17	02:15:52 pm	TYL Home
18	02:16:00 pm	Home & School Learning
19	02:19:27 pm	CMD Home
20	02:19:30 pm	DIS Home
21	02:19:42 pm	EMT Home
22	02:19:48 pm	FND Home
23	02:21:24 pm	GEN Home
24	02:21:30 pm	GLE Home
25	02:21:32 pm	MET Home
26	02:21:42 pm	Advice for Beginning MET
27	02:25:54 pm	DL Archive Home
28	02:27:47 pm	DL Archive Help
29	02:56:36 pm	Useful Links
30	02:57:10 pm	DL Archive Help
31	02:57:33 pm	Site Map
32	02:59:20 pm	DL Archive Home
33	09:22:36 pm	DL Archive Home
34	09:22:53 pm	Updates
35	09:23:33 pm	More Advice for Beginners
36	09:33:27 pm	FND Home
37	09:33:34 pm	A Newcomer to the MSc

Figure 51: SC data of Mari Nakamura's second DLA visit (November 5th, 2005)

Overall, Mari's second visit was a further exploration of the site. This time she visited all the module categories and spent most of her time reading discussion introductions to get an overview of the entire program. She began her visit at the main page, then went to *Updates* to visit a bit of newly archived content (#1-8). After a quick perusal of the ASI, AWD, and CMD categories (#9-11), Mari focused on TYL for a while and visited three of its discussions (#13-18). Next, she returned to category page browsing to investigate the rest of what the MSc had to offer, ending this segment on another thread dealing with advice for beginners (#19-26). Following this was a return to support page browsing (#27-32) in order to complete her tour through the site. While back at the main page, Mari accessed Phil's EFLSupport Site (2006b) and spent time exploring its content (including excerpts of MSc modules). She returned to the DLA over six hours later (#33) and finished up by revisiting two beginner-related topics in the FND category (#34-37). Confirming this analysis, Mari added, "*Yes, I wanted to know what topics are discussed in each category. I kind of thumbed through the pages.*" Mari factored in all she has learned from the DLA and made her decision to apply. A few weeks later I received this message from her.

I just wanted to let you know that I was accepted to the Aston Univ. program. I initially signed up for the MSc in TEYL.

Thank you very much for guiding me through the process, and I am intending to browse your site and see how the program works in more depth before I start it.

Your website was very helpful in making the decision to apply for the program. Actually if it weren't for it, I wonder if I had actually signed up for it! Visiting your site will be definitely one of the best ways to know how the course participants work on their projects.

In Mari's case, the ability to read past ADL contributions played a positive role in the process of her joining the MSc by offering a unique insider's view of course content and community life. Despite not being an actual member of the MSc community of practice, the experience of reading archived discussions allowed her to vicariously imagine herself in this position.

The next case study focuses on Karen Widl and her experience of using the DLA when she was a new CP enrolled on the FND module. I "met" Karen, on the ADL in May 2005 when she introduced herself on the list and asked for advice on completing the AWD portfolio task (Widl 2005). At the end of her message, Karen made an insightful reference to the DLA.

I've read through most of the archive and it's already given me so much information and confidence, that I feel like I've been on the course longer than I really have. Thank you!

Karen's statement helped me understand how reading past ADL contributions could support MSc beginners, an insight I captured in the following theory memo extract.

Karen's comment shows that there is a real need- or even a hunger- for getting up to speed and building up the confidence necessary to tackle the challenges of this program. A clear benefit of the DLA, as seen in just this comment alone, is that reading past discussions boosts confidence and speeds up the socialization process into master's level study.

Seeking confirmation, I contacted Karen off-list and asked her to elaborate on her comment. The first part of her reply highlighted some of the excitement and anxiety new CPs commonly feel when beginning the program.

I suppose it probably stems from the fact that I was a bit anxious about beginning this MSc programme and was thrilled at being accepted at all. My background, although filled with a lot of practical work and a Diploma in TEFL/TESL, isn't what I would consider typical of many CP's who probably have a first degree and more experience in this field. My confidence was somewhat low, thinking that I might not have the background theory and knowledge to succeed on a course like this (that everyone probably knows more than me).

Unsure of her ability to succeed on the MSc, Karen recounted her reaction on reading archived ADL content for the first time.

I was lucky enough to find the archive of past discussions and found a plethora of knowledge (recommended books, suggestions for getting started, how to organise certain tasks, etc). Wow, I was in absolute heaven and spent hours just skimming through what I felt was relevant to me.

SC data reveals that Karen visited the DLA 24 times during the year, averaging twice a month. All told she accounted for 415 pageloads and was the site's most frequent visitor. While most users tended to keep visits short, Karen's were often quite extensive. For example, in the week following the DLA's update on April 10th, 2005, she spent over seven hours browsing through 130 pages on various topics. Her account of that experience clarifies some of the main benefits of reading archived ADL material:

1. Developing a sense of membership and self confidence:

Regarding confidence, as I read through the various postings, I started to have the feeling of belonging and that other CP's had some questions that were similar to mine, thus giving me a sense of "Gee, I would have had the same question but would have been afraid to ask it... guess it wasn't a stupid question after all."

2. Growing self-awareness as a teacher:

Also, I gained so much more exposure to other peoples' opinions that I started to look more analytically at my own teaching... even before I had begun the course!!!!

3. Clarification of expectations:

It was also extremely helpful for me to read the archive because it gave me a sense of what would be expected of me in the programme. You must remember, I began reading through the threads before I had even received the CD's. Especially useful were the comments about how to go about an assignment and what the expectations were from the tutors.

4. Overall course preparation:

I can honestly say that I feel more prepared for the course because I understand what other people are talking about, both in our MSc course and in the TESOL field in general. Without reading previous discussions and feedback, I would have felt like I was jumping into water that might be a bit too deep... now I feel that I am exactly where I should be!

Karen's experience (and Mari's as well) reflects McKendree & Mayes' (1997) assertion that students benefit from vicarious learning- the chance to observe their peers participating in discussions as learners. Through such observation, the confidence necessary for successful learning can be built. As Mayes (2001) notes,

"One of the keys to successful learning, of course, is being able to ask appropriate questions. It may be that this involves confidence as much as skill or knowledge, and observing other learners engaged in such dialogues has its effect by providing a model of good learning behaviour."

Insights into how CPs beyond FND have made use of archived interactions were gathered during the *DL Impact* discussion I began in September 2004 (Talandis 2004). Two CPs responded with DLA-related feedback.

- Jerry- I've looked through the list archive to search for leads on assignment topics. Interesting how things cycle around. And often there are references to books/articles/ideas I hadn't been aware of. Definitely worth doing in the research stage of assignment. So thanks! (Maria Leedham)
- Also like Maria I've used the archive to search for leads, to look up references that I read online but didn't keep, and to get ideas. (Karen Cisney)

For CPs already established on the program, a primary focus is on getting assignments done. Inspiration for ideas and access to previously discussed resources (such as books, articles, and websites) are therefore practical ways in which archived interactions support situated learning for veteran CPs. An example of using the DLA for assignment idea gen-

eration can be found in an ADL discussion started by Robert Haines (Haines 2005). In this discussion, Rob posted his reflections upon having completed Reflective Task 4, a task intended to facilitate assignment idea inspiration (Figure 5m).

Task 4: Assignment Help 1: Browsing for Ideas

This task is designed for CPs who are having trouble getting an idea for an assignment.

Part 1: In whatever module you're working in, take a few moments and write down some aspect of it you are especially interested in.

Part 2: Browse through the archived discussions in the module you are doing. Take notes as you go of anything you find useful, interesting, or lacking.

Part 3: How did it go? How much closer are you to nailing down your assignment topic and focus? Write down a brief summary of your best idea and post it to the [discussion list](#) or [share it one-on-one with Jerry](#).

Figure 5m: Reflective Task 4

In his post, Robert follows-up an earlier discussion of using concordances in the classroom for raising awareness of grammatical structures. Through revisiting what a colleague had done, he was able to generate some ideas for his GLE assignment.

[Mike McDonald's concordance homework | Robert Haines | June 24th, 2005](#)

Mike,

I just came across your very interesting action research results in the DL archive:

(Concordances for grammar awareness | Mike M. | September 28th , 2004)

"After reading a bit about the use of concordances for grammatical consciousness-raising (probably in Willis & Willis or Ellis) I gave two classes of my first-year university students a summer vacation task of looking at 10 pages of Cobuild concordance samples and making some observations about them.

Here are the results of that assignment. Each page contained 40 samples for the phrases "because", "however", "and", "also", "but", "such as", "for example", and "besides", respectively. (All of these phrases are frequently misused or wrongly punctuated.)"

Ramesh mentions in the thread that it would be interesting to follow up on how much of the information was internalized:

"But it would be useful to check (at some point) how much of this information was internalized (how would one best measure that?). Do let me know if you decide to do this. I'd be very interested in the results."

Since I'm in the middle of the AWD, I'm reading a lot into Ramesh's use of 'how much', meaning that I think he's inclined to believe that some of the information was internalized, although the answer could be 'none.'

Question: Have you found a way to indicate whether students internalized (needs defining, that term) the information, and, if so, have you followed up on it?

Also, you mentioned students' noticing:

"I don't know how much they have internalized, but they seem to have noticed an amazing number of details."

Do you mean 'noticing' as in the controversial SLA term, or just that students, prompted by your summer vacation task questions, found relevant answers?

I enjoyed reading your research results, and the thread on Concordances and Grammar Awareness is useful for anyone interested in this area. It's generated some ideas for possible GLE assignment ideas for me.

Reflecting on his experience, Robert pointed out that the process of revisiting an archived discussion stimulated creative thinking in a "pressure-free" environment.

Looking back at Mike's discussion allowed me to examine the information presented there without the 'pressure' of online correspondence. That means I could sift through an archival item without being an interlocutor, which is a different context than online correspondence.

In this case, the DLA provided a measure of flexibility in that Robert was not beholden to active list interaction. He could access content at his own pace and take his time reflecting before providing his eventual response to the list. This form of usage supports the "DLA as reference book" characterization of the site. As it turned out, none of ideas generated from completing the reflective task were realized, but some insights were gained from the process.

In the end, I did my GLE assignment on a much different subject (dictionary use), but the concept of noticing, which came up in Mike's discussion, was applicable to my research. I could have referred back to Ramesh's question about internalization if I'd chosen to follow up on the acquisition of the vocabulary learners were exposed to in my dictionary use research.

From this data it appears that interacting with previous discussions has an indirect effect on the process of assignment production, and is especially useful at the early idea generation stage as a stimulus for brainstorming.

Yes, the process going through the DL did have an effect, however indirect, on the product (my GLE paper). That, to me, is one of the essential purposes for the DL and DLA: creating more resources where the process of learning can flourish.

In carrying out his discussion, Robert exemplified the aims I had set out for the DLA's reflective tasks (Appendix C), which were created to provide guidance and opportunities for interacting with archived content. However, the data extract featuring Robert's discussion was, in fact, the only recorded example of any CP having publicly articulated their reflections. In addition, no CPs contacted me off-list to discuss their thoughts despite my best efforts to elicit this type of feedback. This result was surprising as the tasks were written with practical aims in mind and did not require extra time doing what I considered "non-essential" activities. For example, the first three tasks were targeted at new CPs and had them reflecting on study skills, getting help with portfolio tasks, and seeking advice for deciding course pathways. Tasks three and four focused on the prevalent need for assignment inspiration, while tasks six and seven aimed at encouraging ADL participation by revisiting previously discussed subjects. All of these activities were in line with what CPs regularly do in the course normal study. However, given the scant evidence of reflective task completion, it appears the site failed in its aim of encouraging this sort of formal structured interaction. SC statistics indicate the page containing the tasks ranked #13 in pageloads, so there was confirmation that CPs were aware of their existence. It is possible that some of them were completed in private, but as it stands, browsing seemed to be more the norm. This behavior suggests that in general, CPs perceived the DLA to be a passive rather than active resource, one lending itself to vicarious learning and information gathering rather than acting as a springboard for an enhanced situated learning experience via the ADL.

Chapter 6: Summary & Future Considerations

This chapter is both a look back and a look ahead. Section 6.1 presents a review and summary of findings for each of the three research questions. Section 6.2 takes a critical look at some questions generated by the results and examines possible avenues for further research. Finally, section 6.3 offer some final reflections and ponders challenges and options regarding the site's future.

6.1: Review of research findings

The three questions guiding this research were chosen to uncover how CPs have used the DLA and highlight how the interaction with archived ADL content has supported situated learning on the MSc. The first research question looked at overall reactions of CPs. Amongst predominantly positive feedback, users responded most favorably to the site's design and ease of use. Other comments pointed out several potential benefits, such as enhanced interpersonal and course content support. Overall, CPs felt that the DLA was a useful and welcomed additional resource.

The second research question focused on a quantitative analysis of site usage statistics. Findings suggest that visitors use the site much like a reference book, on occasion for predominantly short visits of 20 minutes or less. While accurate determination of return visitors was problematic, statistics indicate a group of three dozen or so users that frequent the site once or twice per month. With the advent of prominent placement on TESOL-related Google search results in March 2006, usage patterns changed drastically. The site is now accessed primarily by people with no affiliation to the MSc. A vast majority of these visitors do not go beyond one page, but the subsequent increase in return visitors indicates increased exposure for the MSc within the world-wide TESOL research community.

The third research question focused on specific usage experiences from the perspectives of CPs at various stages on the MSc. In the first case, a potential MSc applicant claimed that reading archived discussions strongly influenced her decision to apply. While certainly a best case scenario, this data points out how ADL discourse can provide potential applicants with a unique insider's view of MSc life, a perspective that facilitates decision making in one way or another. In the next case, a new CP doing the FND module remarked that browsing through the DLA helped prepare her for masters level study by providing course content support and clarifying expectations. In both of these situations, the ability to vicariously learn from near-peer role models (Murphy 1996) helped calm nerves and build self-confidence. Course veterans, those beyond FND, claimed practical benefits from reading archived content, such as accessing online resources and generating assignment ideas. From the data gathered, it appears that reading past discussions plays an indirect role in producing assignments and is useful for stimulating creative thinking at the beginning stages of research. Finally, given the failure of the reflective

tasks meant to encourage interaction with archived material, it appears that CPs used and valued the DLA as a passive rather than active resource.

6.2: Further avenues of research

Several critical questions arose from this investigation that warrant further examination. This is in keeping with the cyclical nature of action research, where one round of planning, action, and evaluation leads to the next (Dick 1993). The first one regards the apparent failure of the DLA to encourage active public interaction with archived material. The lack of completion of the reflective tasks raises several questions worthy of investigation: since evidence exists that CPs were aware of the tasks, to what extent were they completing them? What were factors inhibiting the public articulation of insights gained? Are the tasks, as written, the best way of encouraging interaction with archived texts and stimulating the social discourse necessary for situated learning to flourish? If not, what are some other possible solutions? Questionnaires and interviews could be conducted to shed light on these issues with an overall aim of deepening understanding of how situated learning can be enhanced on the MSc.

Another issue worthy of follow-up is the DLA's effect on ADL participation levels. It was my hope all along that the act of publishing ADL discourse would inspire greater participation on the ADL by providing models of appropriate style, tone, and content (Lapadat 2002) that helped CPs overcome any barriers of shyness or low self-esteem. Has the DLA helped increase ADL participation? The following CP feedback suggests this is not the case. The first comment points out that the advantages of permanence inherent within writing may, in fact, be inhibiting ADL activity.

Have you thought that your archive actually might reduce interaction as CPs can search for info on your site without writing an email (to the ADL)? It is these permanent features of the archive (structured, available to anyone at any time, not time-bound, searchable) that might reduce email interaction. If you can read Plato, you don't need to speak to anyone about philosophy (though it might be useful). You can interact with his words without him being there. An example, I know a lot about Zen Buddhism, but I've never been to Japan or mentioned the word to anyone in my family. I just interact with books.

This next comment exemplifies this point, indicating a preference for the convenience of acquiring quick answers to simple questions.

I really used it (the DLA) when I wanted an answer to the problem of how one mentions the foreign references, and since I remembered that the issue had come

up I thought of trying to look it up in the archive and save myself the time of posting a message and waiting for a reply. And the main reason for using it again was that I wanted some answers quickly! I do not know, though, how much its existence takes something away from the list since people can use the archive for finding answers to their problems or queries instead of using the list.

On the other hand, comments I received from another CP present a different picture. In this case, the presence of the DLA motivated list participation.

I find myself starting new threads knowing that they will be archived by you and, therefore, useful to future CPs.

In this situation, the desire to fill a gap in our community's discourse provides an impetus to contribute and pass on information and experience for the benefit of future CPs.

I write about the things that I wanted to know about and couldn't find any info on in the course itself. I was fortunate enough to have the help of a couple of students who were also university teachers with PhDs and tutors for MSc students, they gave me advice regarding the format for the diss. and on the type of questions I'd be asked in the viva. I want to pass this valuable info on to help others who will be in the same position I've been in. After all, as I said in my last entry to the list, we deserve all the help we can get because our task is a hard one.

So, in light of these comments, is the DLA contributing to an overall decline in ADL activity, simply altering it, or both? Could it be that certain topics will see less discussion while others see more, with the overall level of remaining about the same? And what about the influence Blackboard-centered discussion among groups of lock-step CPs? Could this be impacting ADL usage more than the presence of the DLA? The context provided by a database of past messages creates opportunities for new forms of discussions to develop, such as ones following-up on past unanswered questions, building on previous iterations of a topic, or as cited above, addressing "gaps" in our collective discourse history.

6.3: Final thoughts and the future

Ever since the DLA went online there have been questions regarding its future status after I graduate:

- I think the question: are you intending to continue, or who will continue it, is an important one.
- What about future discussions? Will you continue to input the data into archives? For how long?

The DLA's fate will need to be discussed in the near future amongst interested parties. To provide a starting point for that discussion, I will offer some final thoughts on this pro-

ject, clarify the challenges and constraints facing the site's continued development, and end with a detailed overview of what I consider the most promising option: converting the site into a online discussion forum.

Creating the DLA has been an honor and privilege. Working on this project has provided a unique learning opportunity, one enabling me to give something back to our community from which I have gained so much. As Jonnasen (1998) points out, "*the people who learn the most from designing instructional materials are the designers, not the learners for whom the materials are intended.*" While the ADL has been perceived as an underused resource frequented by only a few active participants (Packett 2000, Norman 2001, Talandis 2002, Beaudry 2005), the fact remains that when gathered together in one place, the collective writings make for a powerful educational reading experience. The individual journeys we have written about, the issues we have discussed, investigated, and debated have become part of a living, ever-growing corpus of situated learning in action. An archived ADL is therefore more than just a reference, it is the story of our community's development. As Mann (personal correspondence) remarks, "*the interesting thing about this on-line community is that they are all engaging in classroom research, reflection-on-experience, and therefore knowledge is constructed through exchange and collaboration.*" This story of reflection, knowledge building, and development is one that needs to be preserved and made available to future generations of CPs. However, the question remains- what is the best way to accomplish this?

There are a number of constraints and challenges to consider when deciding the future status of the DLA. First and foremost is my need to eventually remove myself from a leadership position on this project. The site cannot remain indefinitely on my ISP, nor can I be solely responsible for collecting and processing ADL discourse. An inherent flaw in the approach I have taken is that the site is overly dependent on me. While the hard work of archiving the complete ADL database has been done and a smooth system for processing current discussions established, it is unrealistic to expect anyone to take on the continuation of this project in the way that I have. It is simply not appropriate to lay another burden of responsibility upon already busy CPs and tutors. As a result, the DLA must become a self-sustaining resource, one with its own home, where the entire MSc community can easily share the responsibility for its growth and maintenance.

Finally, there are two other constraints requiring consideration: money and interactivity. The costs of maintaining the DLA have been relatively low. Nevertheless, budgets

are perpetually tight, so if the site does not depend on or require any financial support, it stands a greater chance of success in the long run. In addition, the issue of encouraging CP interactivity with archived texts is important to consider since the social dimension of situated learning requires reflection and articulation in order to flourish. The DLA's reflective tasks were an attempt to facilitate this interaction, but clearly there is room for improvement in this area. Any future version of the site must therefore provide more opportunities for cognitive and social interaction. This aim ties in with the previous assertion that in order for the site to continue, CPs must claim a sense of collective ownership. Jonnasen (1998) points out the benefits of what can happen when learners take command of their learning resources:

"Therefore, I shall argue that we should take the tools away from the designers and give them to the learners, as tools for knowledge construction rather than media of conveyance and knowledge acquisition. The process of building knowledge bases using these tools will engage the learners more and result in more meaningful and transferable knowledge in the learners. I argue that we should invest the power of the technologies in the learners. Power to the people, so to speak."

Given the constraints of time, money, and energy, what viable options exist? A suggestion I received from a CP hints at a potential solution:

- **As for the future, it would be fantastic if either the archive became its own discussion board or if more people contributed to the board already in place at Phil Quirke's site. I really believe the idea of having such a resource is critical to expanding the communication base of all CPs.**

Transforming the DLA from a static website into an interactive Internet forum has many attractive advantages worth considering. The forum at Phil's EFLSupport Site (Quirke 2006b) provides a model (Figure 6a). Forums are easy to set up, use, and maintain (Quirke, personal correspondence). The DLA's current three-level format could be easily adapted, with module categories containing the individual discussions. The ease at which categories are manipulated provides a wider range of organizational options. The current set-up for the DLA is basically set in stone- structural enhancements are prohibitive as even the smallest change would require a complete redo of the site. Comparatively, forums can change and grow as the community sees fit, resulting in a flexible and adaptable resource more responsive to the wishes and desires of its users. After the initial set up I would be freed from sole responsibility of collecting and archiving ADL discussions.

The screenshot shows a forum page for 'philsefissupport'. At the top, it says 'Welcome Guest, Please Login or Register.' and 'Mar 30, 2006, 2:03am'. There are navigation links for home, help, search, login, and register. Below that, there are two advertisements: 'Dissertation Proposal' and 'Online Phd Degree'. The main content is a table of forum threads. The table has columns for Subject, Started by, Replies, Views, and Last Post. The threads listed include 'Re: Would you share your stories?', 'DELTA:Resource/Materials Assignment', 'MSC Dissertations', 'TBL (Willis model)', 'TESOL PhD CALL component Distance Learning', 'The Aston MSc DL Archive has been updated', 'Professional Doctorate or PhD?', 'Doing a PhD', 'MA Applied Linguistics', 'any DELTA students out there?', 'Research and The 'net', 'Life Experience Degrees', 'MSc (FND)Books', 'MET Proposal', 'Homeroom Teachers in Japan', 'Citing Aston binders', 'Something Grammatical', 'Question for all interested', 'Approaching the FND', and 'ERIC'. At the bottom, there are links for 'Click Here To Make This Board Ad-Free', 'Cruises | Carnival Cruises | Princess Cruises | Royal Caribbean | Hotel Deals | Music Transcription |', and 'This Board Hosted For FREE By Proboards'.

Subject	Started by	Replies	Views	Last Post
Re: Would you share your stories?	Elizabeth	1	138	Jan 20, 2006, 8:04am by Phil Quirke
DELTA:Resource/Materials Assignment	D	1	84	Jan 20, 2006, 8:02am by Phil Quirke
MSC Dissertations	Julie	1	43	Jan 20, 2006, 7:59am by Phil Quirke
TBL (Willis model)	Julie Constantine	1	52	Jan 20, 2006, 7:58am by Phil Quirke
TESOL PhD CALL component Distance Learning	James	11	818	Aug 25, 2005, 12:54pm by Phil
The Aston MSc DL Archive has been updated	Jerry	1	99	Aug 25, 2005, 12:49pm by Phil
Professional Doctorate or PhD?	jmpeters	1	98	Aug 25, 2005, 12:47pm by Phil
Doing a PhD	Andy	4	223	May 13, 2005, 10:22am by Phil Quirke
MA Applied Linguistics	Louise	1	127	May 13, 2005, 10:19am by Phil Quirke
any DELTA students out there?	Ephie	1	118	May 13, 2005, 10:16am by Phil Quirke
Research and The 'net	john	9	726	May 4, 2004, 11:20am by Phil Quirke
Life Experience Degrees	James	2	283	Jan 23, 2005, 10:25am by eslandteacher
MSc (FND)Books	Abul-Hassan	7	206	Oct 15, 2004, 7:47am by Phil Quirke
MET Proposal	leo19	7	80	Oct 15, 2004, 7:38am by Phil Quirke
Homeroom Teachers in Japan	Abul-Hassan	1	110	Oct 15, 2004, 7:36am by Phil Quirke
Citing Aston binders	Rob	5	168	Oct 15, 2004, 7:34am by Phil Quirke
Something Grammatical	PaulRaper	5	182	Aug 17, 2004, 1:30am by Rob
Question for all interested	DeSummit	2	467	Jul 29, 2004, 6:52am by PaulRaper
Approaching the FND	Jerry	10	301	Jul 23, 2004, 2:49am by PaulRaper
ERIC	PaulRaper	0	111	Jul 10, 2004, 8:07am by PaulRaper

Figure 6a: Discussion forum at Phil's EFLSupport.com.

With a forum, CPs could do this task on their own. For example, if someone felt a list discussion was worth saving, archiving would entail a simple copy and paste into a new forum thread in the correct category. Additional opportunities for interaction are also an advantage. For example, users could instantly add on to archived threads, begin new iterations of popular topics, and even create new ones. With an automatic e-mail notification feature common to most forums these days, users could receive message notifying them that new posts had been made. This enhanced interactivity could therefore provide more opportunities for building semantic cohesion (Lapadat 2002). Finally, from a promotional standpoint, an open forum would offer a place for prospective applicants to connect and interact with current CPs.

Despite the advantages, there is one disadvantage worth noting. The site would require occasional moderation and maintenance for it to function at its highest potential. For example, discussions and threads would need to be monitored and kept in good or-

ganizational order. At this time it is not clear exactly what sort of time commitment these duties would entail. Quirke's experience (personal correspondence) indicates that moderating tasks need not take a great deal of time: "*I use ProBoards as the discussion board and spend next to zero maintaining it... maybe a once a week drop in to see if anything has to be deleted off it. It's the easiest thing I've ever done on the web.*" An ideal situation would be for several volunteers to divide up and rotate the various duties in an equitable fashion. If this does not happen, then at the very least the site would exist much as it does now— as a static repository of archived ADL material, but with greater interactive potential.

To get a better idea of what setting up a discussion forum entails, I endeavored to set up a test site. At the outset, I was faced with two viable options: sign up with a forum provider company such as *ProBoards.com* (2006), or make use of open source forum software and place the site on a free website hosting service. Each choice presented various advantages and disadvantages. In short, a free forum provider offers a total, easy to use solution (including web-hosting), but places advertising on each page. An open source solution contains no advertising, appears more feature-rich, but requires effort to find a free web host with data base server software (such as MySQL) pre-installed. A brief look around the Internet revealed a vast array of choices within both options, so more research will need to be done before a decision can be made.

In the meantime, I set up a free discussion forum over at *SetBB.com*, a service featuring *phpBB* (2006), the popular open-source forum software. Sure enough, it was very easy to set up and arrange the discussion board (Figure 6b). Within an hour I had replicated the DLA's structure and copied over all of the discussions from the DIS category. As I suspected, moving content from the DLA was a technically simple process. With two browser windows open I could copy a thread from the DLA, create a new post in the relevant forum, then paste in the discussion. What took some time was applying bold, italics, or quoted text html tags to make the text easier to read. Like any repetitive task, however, the more I did it, the faster and more efficient I became. The list of features available through phpBB was impressive (Appendix D), but I did not enjoy looking at the SetBB.com advertisements. If possible, an ideal solution would be a free web host without advertisements in combination with open-source software.

Word count: 15,006

Customizable banner area points to the logo and navigation links at the top of the page.

Advertisements points to the sponsored links for Mikrooptiken und Laser, Xeon Dedicated Servers, Cheap Affordable Hosting, and Dedicated Server Host.

Separate forum for each archive category points to the 'Archive Categories' section of the forum index table.

Separate categories for popular module categories points to the 'Foundation Module', 'Grammar & Lexis Module', and 'General Topics' sections.

Additional forums points to the 'Frequently Asked Questions' and 'Reflective Tasks' sections.

Online member and log-in areas points to the 'Who is Online' status and the 'Log in' form at the bottom.

The forum interface includes a header with the site name 'The DL Archive', navigation links (FAQ, Search, Memberlist, Usergroups, Register, Profile, Log in), and a table of forum categories. The table lists categories such as 'Analysing Spoken Interaction', 'Analyzing Written Discourse', 'Course & Materials Design', 'Discontinued Modules', 'Dissertation', 'Educational Management in TESOL', 'Methodology', 'Teaching Young Learners', 'Foundation Module', 'Grammar & Lexis Module', 'General Topics', 'About This Site', and 'Who is Online'. Each category includes a description, the number of topics and posts, and the last post date and time.

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post
Archive Categories			
Analysing Spoken Interaction Discussions pertaining to the ASI module.	3	3	Thu Mar 30, 2006 11:13 pm admin ↑
Analyzing Written Discourse Discussions pertaining to the AWD module.	0	0	No Posts
Course & Materials Design Discussions pertaining to the CMD module.	0	0	No Posts
Discontinued Modules Discussions pertaining to modules that have been discontinued (TD, DE, SL).	0	0	No Posts
Dissertation Discussions pertaining to the DIS module.	6	6	Thu Mar 30, 2006 11:50 pm admin ↑
Educational Management in TESOL Discussions pertaining to the EMT module.	0	0	No Posts
Methodology Discussions pertaining to the MET module.	0	0	No Posts
Teaching Young Learners Discussions pertaining to the TYL module.	0	0	No Posts
Foundation Module			
Study Advice Discussions that offer tips, tricks, and advice for developing your master's level study skills.	0	0	No Posts
Portfolio Task Tips Tips and advice for completing the FND portfolio tasks.	0	0	No Posts
General FND Issues Discussions pertaining to general FND-related issues.	0	0	No Posts
Grammar & Lexis Module			
General GLE Issues Discussions pertaining to general GLE issues.	0	0	No Posts
GLE Resources A compendium of discussions containing resources (both on and off-line) pertaining to the GLE module.	0	0	No Posts
General Topics			
Discussion List Discussion Discussions about the MSc email discussion list.	0	0	No Posts
Doing Assignments Tips, tricks, and advice for getting your assignments done.	0	0	No Posts
Online Resources A collection of discussion list announcements of relevant online resources.	0	0	No Posts
General Issues A collection of discussions that don't fit neatly into any module category.	0	0	No Posts
Humor Discussions dealing with TESOL-related humor.	0	0	No Posts
About This Site			
Frequently Asked Questions Common questions about using this site are answered.	0	0	No Posts
Reflective Tasks These tasks are designed to help you interact and reflect on some of the content archived in this site.	0	0	No Posts
All times are GMT + 9 Hours			
Who is Online			
Our users have posted a total of 9 articles We have 1 registered user The newest registered user is admin In total there is 1 user online :: 1 Registered, 0 Hidden and 0 Guests [Administrator] [Moderator] [[Test]] Most users ever online was 2 on Thu Mar 30, 2006 9:45 pm Registered Users: admin			
This data is based on users active over the past five minutes			
Log in			
Username: <input type="text"/> Password: <input type="password"/> Log me on automatically each visit <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="button" value="Log in"/>			
<input type="button" value="New posts"/> <input type="button" value="No new posts"/> <input type="button" value="Forum is locked"/>			
<small>Powered by phpBB © 2001, 2005 phpBB Group</small> <small>Free message board hosting powered by setbb. Create your free message board now! Hosted on DUAL XEON, 4GB RAM, SCSI drive RAID 1 dedicated servers at SAGONET data center with premium dedicated server bandwidth. Report any free message board hosting violation at setbb support forum. free message board hosting directory</small>			

Figure 6b: Test version of DLA as discussion forum.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample of raw, unformatted ADL data

(As it appears upon downloading from the Majordomo server)

From owner-tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk Wed Feb 19 22:08:56 2003
Received: from root by mercury.aston.ac.uk with local (Exim 3.30 #1)
id 18lcO2-0003kh-00
for tesptesolmsc-outgoing@aston.ac.uk; Wed, 19 Feb 2003 22:08:18 +0000
Received: from hermes ([134.151.79.46] helo=hermes.aston.ac.uk)
by mercury.aston.ac.uk with esmtp (Exim 3.30 #1)
id 18lcO1-0003kc-00
for tesptesolmsc@mercury.aston.ac.uk; Wed, 19 Feb 2003 22:08:17 +0000
Received: from [203.216.5.131] (helo=smt01.fields.gol.com)
by hermes.aston.ac.uk with esmtp (Exim 3.30 #1)
id 18lcPz-0000z9-00
for tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk; Wed, 19 Feb 2003 22:10:19 +0000
Received: from db03.fields.gol.com ([203.216.5.173] helo=localhost)
by smp01.fields.gol.com with esmtp (Magnetic Fields)
id 18lcPy-0004K2-00
for <tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk>; Thu, 20 Feb 2003 07:10:18 +0900
Received: from tc-1-184.tama.gol.ne.jp ([203.216.33.184] helo=prufrock)
by smp01.fields.gol.com with smp (Magnetic Fields)
id 18lcPx-0004Jz-00
for <tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk>; Thu, 20 Feb 2003 07:10:17 +0900
Message-ID: <001001c2d864\$b4e486c0\$b821d8cb@prufrock>

From: "Andy" <prufrock@gol.com>
To: "aston university" <tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk>
Subject: PhonePass test
Date: Thu, 20 Feb 2003 07:17:34 +0900
MIME-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: multipart/alternative;
boundary="-----_NextPart_000_000D_01C2D8B0.23B7FFA0"
X-Priority: 3
X-MSMail-Priority: Normal
X-Mailer: Microsoft Outlook Express 5.50.4920.2300
X-MimeOLE: Produced By Microsoft MimeOLE V5.50.4920.2300
X-Virus-Scanned: by AMaViS
X-Abuse-Complaints: abuse@gol.com
Sender: owner-tesptesolmsc@aston.ac.uk
Precedence: bulk
This is a multi-part message in MIME format.

-----=_NextPart_000_000D_01C2D8B0.23B7FFA0
Content-Type: text/plain;
charset="iso-8859-1"
Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable

A while back, there was a discussion about the Phone Pass test in Japan. =
I just found an interview with the guy who developed the system.
http://www.eltnews.com/features/interviews/021_jared_bernstein.shtml
Happy Reading
Andy in Japan

-----=_NextPart_000_000D_01C2D8B0.23B7FFA0
Content-Type: text/html;
charset="iso-8859-1"
Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable

<!DOCTYPE HTML PUBLIC "-//W3C//DTD HTML 4.0 Transitional//EN">
<HTML><HEAD>
<META http-equiv=3DContent-Type content=3D"text/html"; =
charset=3Diso-8859-1">
<META content=3D"MSHTML 5.50.4919.2200" name=3DGENERATOR>

Extraneous data

Relevant message header information

Full extent of posted message

Appendix B: Screenshot of the DLA home page

The screenshot shows the DLA home page with the following content:

Site definition: A callout box points to the introductory text: "This site is dedicated to preserving and creating access to messages sent to the Aston University English Academic Subject Group discussion list (DL). Fully updated to reflect recent program changes, the DL Archive aims to turn our community's discourse history into a useful, interactive tool that enhances situated learning and encourages greater use of public, collaborative study via the discussion list."

Invitation to reflective tasks: A callout box points to the "take a guided tour" section: "For a more in-depth experience, a new 'Guided Tour' page consisting of reflective tasks has been designed to help you interact with our community's discourse history in practical ways. The tasks guide you quickly and interactively to archived content relevant to your needs. For example, if you're just getting started with the FND, you'll find tasks to help you develop your study skills, get help with portfolio tasks, and decide your course pathway. If you're stuck for an assignment topic, there are tasks that help generate inspiration and ideas. Finally, other tasks showcase how the discussions archived in this site can provide background and context for further exploration on the discussion list."

Suggested uses: A callout box points to the "use the dl archive to..." section, which includes sub-sections like "Get up to speed quickly:", "Check out potential modules:", "Get ideas for assignments:", "Establish context for current DL discussions:", and "Access original DL data:".

The page also features a navigation menu (home, asi, awd, cmd, dis, emt, fnd, gen, gle, met, tyl), a search bar, and a sidebar with "Archive Categories" and "Useful Links".

Appendix C: DLA Reflective Tasks

TASK 1: DEVELOPING YOUR STUDY SKILLS

Many CPs begin this program after a long time away from intensive study. At the beginning, it's always a challenge to shake off the rust and get back in the swing of studying, especially at the master's level. Finding time to complete school work on top of busy work and family obligations demands clear & organized study skills. This task is designed to help you consider and develop your approach to study.

Part 1: Reflection on current practice

Take a few moments and write down a few thoughts regarding the way you approach the following aspects of studying for a masters degree:

Assignments: When do you get around to thinking of a topic for your assignment? Do you try to come up with something quickly, or do you wait until you've made your way through all the reading? What are the advantages and disadvantages to your approach?

Study time: How do you plan and organize your study time? For example, do you prefer to study a little each day, or do you like to set aside long blocks of time every week or so? What are some difficulties you have regarding study time, and how have you tried to overcome them?

Information retrieval strategies (such as note taking, keeping track of references, etc): As you read through a module, how do you go about taking notes? In addition, what's your system for keeping track of quotations and references?

Reflection: To what degree do you do the reflective tasks within the FND? Do you keep a journal, as is recommended? How keen are you on this practice?

Motivation: What do you do to get back on track when you're feeling de-motivated?

Course completion: How long are you planning on taking to finish the MSc? What are some merits/ demerits of your choice?

Required reading: What books will you buy (did you buy) for the FND, and why? How did you go about deciding which to purchase?

Part 2: Learning from your peers

Read the discussions in the "Study Skills Advice" section of the Foundation module category. As you read, make note of anything that strikes you as interesting, useful, or lacking.

Part 3: Share your impressions

Compare your notes of the readings with your previous reflections on your current study approaches. What did you learn from reading about how others on the program approach master's level study? Additionally, was there some technique, strategy, or practice that you've found successful that others could benefit from? Post your thoughts and ideas to the discussion list or share them one-on-one with Jerry.

TASK 2: PORTFOLIO TASK HELP

Part 1: Reflection on current practice

Write down a few thoughts on the following questions: What is your approach toward the portfolio tasks? For example, do you take them on to completion one by one, or are you waiting to put them off until later? Which task is most challenging, and why?

Part 2: Learning from your peers

Read the discussion threads in the "FND Portfolio Tasks" section of the Foundation category page. Jot down any thoughts or anything useful, interesting, or lacking that come to mind while reading.

Part 3: Share your impressions

What did you learn, if anything, from reading the threads on portfolio tasks? Post your thoughts and ideas to the discussion list or share them one-on-one with Jerry.

TASK 3: DECIDING YOUR COURSE PATHWAY

Part 1: Reflection on current practice

If you haven't yet decided your course pathway, take a few moments to write down a few thoughts about it. Which courses are you leaning toward taking, and why? If you're having trouble deciding, why?

Part 2: Learning from your peers

Read the discussions in the "Course Pathway" section of the Foundation category. Alternatively, if there is a specific course you'd like to know more about, browse through and read any interesting threads. Take notes as you read of anything you find useful, interesting, or lacking.

Part 3: Sharing your impressions

What did you get out of reading how others have approached this important task? To what extent did reading discussions about a module help you decide on taking it or not? Post your thoughts and ideas to the discussion list or share them one-on-one with Jerry.

TASK 4: ASSIGNMENT HELP 1: BROWSING FOR IDEAS

This task is designed for CPs who are having trouble getting an idea for an assignment.

Part 1: In whatever module you're working in, take a few moments and write down some aspect of it you are especially interested in.

Part 2: Browse through the archived discussions in the module you are doing. Take notes as you go of anything you find useful, interesting, or lacking.

Part 3: How did it go? How much closer are you to nailing down your assignment topic and focus? Write down a brief summary of your best idea and post it to the discussion list or share it one-on-one with Jerry.

TASK 5: ASSIGNMENT HELP 2: OFFERING FEEDBACK

Again, this task is designed for CPs who need help thinking of an assignment focus, but it takes a different approach. Instead of thinking about your own situation, take some time to help someone else. Hopefully the act of giving advice can shake loose some ideas regarding your own situation.

Part 1: Read the discussion entitled "MET Assignment Proposals", started by Robert Haines. In this thread, Rob asks for feedback & advice about three different ideas.

Part 2: Which of Rob's proposals do you like the best? Why? Do you agree or disagree with the feedback he got? If you had posted a reply, what would you have said?

Part 3: What did you learn from the experience of giving advice to someone else needing help? How has this helped you in your own search for an assignment topic? Post your thoughts and ideas to the discussion list or share them one-on-one with Jerry.

TASK 6: BUILDING ON A DISCUSSION

This task is designed to take a discussion from the past and build on it. The idea here is to use the DL as a platform upon which to deepen exploration of topics, questions, or issues relevant to your interests and situation.

Part 1: Browse through the archive and find a discussion that strikes your fancy in some way. It could be about a controversial issue, such as Pennycook & cultural imperialism, or one that asks a simple question you find interesting or that wasn't answered to your satisfaction. If you have some idea of your area of interest, try doing a word search and browsing through the results.

Part 2: Add your thoughts to this discussion. You can write your thoughts to Jerry, or start a new version of the thread on the discussion list. Be sure to post a link to the discussion you're building on.

TASK 7: REVISITING A DISCUSSION


The goal of this task is to bring you back to a discussion you participated in and reflect on how your thinking has evolved.

Part 1: Type your name into a word search box on any page and bring up a list of all the discussions you have participated in. Alternately, you do a search and find several discussions that you enjoyed observing at one time or another.

Part 2: Reread an especially interesting discussion and write down any impressions. What do you think now about what you said or read?

Part 3: To what degree has your thinking evolved since that discussion took place? Do you still hold the same position/reaction, or has it changed? If so, how? Post your thoughts and ideas to the discussion list or share them one-on-one with Jerry.

Appendix D: Features available for phpBB forum software




creating communities

[Features](#)
[Demo](#)
[Downloads](#)
[Support](#)
[Community](#)
[Styles](#)
[Mods](#)

[News](#) | [About](#) | [Home](#)

Features



- Installation
- Database Support
- Security
- Forums & Categories
- Posting Messages
- User & Group Permissions
- Member Features
- Moderation
- Administration
- Style & Customisation
- Support

phpBB version 2 has been completely re-written since the first version. Version 2 focuses on a professional-quality modular design, high security, multiple-language interface, support for a multitude of databases servers and complete layout customisation, all with a low execution overhead.

phpBB is based on PHP, the fastest growing server-side scripting language on the web, which results in one of the fastest, feature-rich bulletin board systems available *anywhere*.

In addition, phpBB is open-source software so it has no fees, no subscriptions, and no restrictions on modifications. Couple this with a thriving and friendly phpBB community and you have a killer solution for creating communities on *your* site!

Installation Top

- Simple installation that will have you up and running in minutes
- Complete upgrade from V1.x

Database Server Support Top

- phpBB uses a database abstraction layer to enable seamless support of several database servers:
 - MySQL 3.2x,
 - PostgreSQL 7.x,
 - Microsoft SQL Server 7/2000
 - Microsoft Access (via ODBC)
 - ...with more databases available in the future.

Security Top

- Designed with security as a priority
- Powerful and extensive authorisation system
- Strong encryption to keep passwords safe in the database
- Support for both cookie and URI-based sessions

Unlimited Forums & Categories Top

- Unlimited forums can be organised into as many categories as you like
- Private forums and those only for specified user groups
- Powerful search facility

Posting Messages Top

- Message formatting with various font styles and sizes as well as allowing quoting, code display, image posting and automatic URL linking
- Support of standard and extended BBCode tags and controlled HTML tags
- Polls can be simply added to posts
- Email notification of replies to your topics
- Powerful topic subscription capability
- Original emoticons to portray emotions

Versatile User Groups & Forum Permissions Top

- Powerful forum, user and group permission management
- Control forum access to specified user groups
- Control all aspects of the posting experience
- Allow limited access to viewing, posting, replying and many other options

Member Features Top

- Unlimited members
- Personal profile creation
- Post counting and administrator-definable ranks for users
- Email-like private messaging system
- Supports local, remote and uploadable avatars

Moderation Features Top

- Topic editing
- Mass delete/move/lock/unlock of posts
- Topic splitting
- Option of auto-pruning of old or unanswered messages on a per-forum basis

Easy to Use Administration Centre Top

- General configuration
- Forum & category setup
- Easy database backup and restore
- Disallowed usernames
- User authorisation
- Word censoring
- Complete member management
- Emoticon setup
- Optional account verification
- Extensive ban management, ban by email address, username or single/multiple IP address or hostname
- IP tracking of posts and posters
- Mass emailing of groups and users by the administrator

Style and Customisation Top

- Multiple styles available for the user to choose from
- Templates separated from the PHP code so that new layouts can easily be created or integrated with your current site design
- Complete control of fonts and colours with cascading style sheets (CSS)
- Active community creating addons and specialised modifications
- Default style compliant with XHTML 1.0 and HTML 4.01 recommendations from the W3C

Support Top

- All this is supported by an increasingly large, thriving and friendly community of members from all over the world ready to help with any problems, suggestions or just for general discussion!

[News](#) | [Features](#) | [Demo](#) | [Downloads](#) | [Support](#) | [Community](#) | [Styles](#) | [Mods](#) | [Merchandise](#) | [About](#) | [Home](#)
[Web Hosting](#) | [Host Department Web Hosting](#) | [Online Sportsbook](#) | [Web Hosting](#) | [phpBB Hosting](#) at \$7.95

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