

**Contribution to Symposium on:** e-learning, e-tutoring, the e-university

**Title of Paper:** High Level Student Autonomy in a Virtual Learning Environment

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**Institution:** Participants on the MEd NCL at Sheffield University

**Session Type:** Individual research paper presented in a symposium

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**Number of words:** 539

**Five key words:** Tutorless learning sets, student autonomy

## **High Level Student Autonomy in a Virtual Learning Environment**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences and responses of students and tutors to the development of a tutor-less group within a tutored learning environment in the context of a part time MEd programme.

This paper considers and reflects upon the experiences of six post-graduate students (the authors) who negotiated with their course tutors to study in a "tutor-less" learning set for a period of five weeks. In the context of this paper "tutor-less" means no contact between the set members and the tutors. This tutor-less learning set formed early on in the second year of the part time MEd in Networked Collaborative Learning at Sheffield University. The MEd is taught entirely on-line and there is no face-to-face contact between tutors and students during the programme. The paper also considers and reflects upon the experiences of the nine students who worked in "tutored" learning sets and two members of academic staff who were the tutors during the same five weeks. The paper considers provisional views of what may be learnt from our experiences and the potential for similar "tutor-less" learning sets to operate in other fully web based courses.

In undertaking the research for this paper, three distinct time periods were identified, which were:

Firstly, the period leading up to the formation of our learning set;

Secondly, the period in which the our learning set was in existence;

Thirdly, the period after our learning set "disbanded" and its members rejoined tutored learning sets that had been formed before our learning set had emerged.

We wanted to address, understand, analyse and synthesise certain issues pertaining to each of the three time periods above, as follows:

The first time period:

Why some of some of us wanted to work in such a set; what the tutors' views were; and what the views of those who wanted to stay in tutored groups were.

The second time period:

How "well" we worked together; the extent to which working in our set seemed "different" from our past experiences of tutored sets; the extent to which our absence affected the tutored sets; what the tutors views and concerns were; and the extent to which our learning was comparable with those in tutored sets.

The third time period:

How reintegration between ourselves and those in tutored sets occurred; how any problems or issues of concern regarding reintegration were overcome;

We used a case study approach in our research so that we could perhaps draw out some points unique to the case and some points that could be applied in other situations.

We used a variety of qualitative data and evidence collection and analysis approaches in order that triangulation of our research could be achieved.

The data and evidence collection approaches included the following:

1. A questionnaire to those studying and tutoring on the MEd;
2. The messages posted into the various discussion fora;
3. An analysis of our personal diary/ logs;
4. On-line interviews.

These findings are discussed with respect to theoretical models relating to learner autonomy, knowledge construction, and the development of communities of practice.

Total word count: 539.