CONTRIBUTION TO SYMPOSIUM ON:

TITLE OF PAPER: The BA in the Internet , Learning and Organizations: A peer to peer approach to distance learning
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PROPOSAL:

This paper provides an account of the use of Colloquia, a peer to peer learning environment, to deliver a new distance learning part-time degree at Bangor University, entitled the "BA in the Internet, Learning and Organizations". Colloquia differs from most learning environments in that it is a personal application, running on each student's or teacher's machine, and is not a server based environment. It supports a conversational approach to learning, supported by learning content, and provides for both group and personal interaction between course members, but without providing any server based facilities.

The degree is being offered for the first time as a pilot for this model of course provision, and is configured as a piece of "action research", with students participating in regular focus group discussions on their experience, the results oif which are used to both adapt the approach and the software system. One key finding so far concerns the level of participation by students. Whereas with server based discussion groups, participation levels tend to be low, and "lurking" high, the experience of this course has been the reverse. Suggestions as to why this may be the case will be made in the paper. The design of the environment also encourages course materials to be adapted as the course. In this regard it is closer to typical face-to-face courses than rather than traditional pre-prepared distance learning packages.

The academic area that degree is concerned with means that students are engaged in the very activities they are studying which has enabled reflection to take place at a surprisingly sophisticated level for a first year first semester cohort. It has attracted a wide range of students, some already well qualified, and because it is part-time, many of whom are in work.

The paper describes the educational and organizational theories and rationale behind the design and development of the environment. It also outlines the course process: how the course was developed, the design of activities and supporting materials, how students were inducted into the course method, training and support issues that have arisen, and how it has unfolded over its first semester, presenting initial findings and observations from the case study research employed in evaluating the degree.