



towards effective triratna study online
by candradasa (august 2011)

introduction

I wanted to write something about online study, which I've been researching over the past couple of weeks. I'd appreciate your general input on this, and I have something cool for you to try out, as well as a proposal for a further test of said cool thing... :) I've sent this to people I've spoken to about online Dharma study during the start-up phase of thebuddhistcentre.com. Please feel free to share this document with anyone else you think may have useful input. I am working towards developing a kula to look at online study and, in time, all those interested can organise that via the new site itself. For now though, email will be fine.

why online study?

We're a Buddhist Centre! Dharma study and discussion is one of the best aspects of our local sangha experience and our international efforts towards maintaining coherence of approach to the Dharma. We've already handled enquiries from folk keen to study the Dharma who aren't near a Buddhist Centre, and when we asked about online study on Facebook we got a warm response and a healthy amount of active interest.

We also think it would help augment the study experience at local Centres. Groups could have 'homework' they engage with between classes that is interactive and communal. They might also use online resources to prepare for an upcoming class. One-off or informal discussion/study could take place (around a Festival, for example) using the same approach. People who miss weeks on a course could catch up on the course materials with a greater sense of connection to their fellow class members.

what are the issues?

In talking with Steven Caldwell (a Mitra in Sydney who specialises in online learning) it's clear there's a real need to make sure the experience is as personal as possible and works as much as is practicable within the context of the online student's life, whether or not they also attend classes at a Buddhist Centre where they live. We're not currently great at this on our main 'study' space, which is the Dharma Training Course for Mitras on FBA. That's more of a repository for course files (with some support in the form of online reference sections) and the material itself is still strongly oriented towards reading-based study that will happen in a class situation at a Centre. When we're designing the online courses of the future some of that will still be valid, but we could do a lot better with the new media resources available to us now.

There are many options for 'blended learning' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blended_learning) and we need to find a solution that is pragmatic, affordable and doesn't represent too much of a challenge for those we'd like to help create Dharma study opportunities online, or for those we'd like to take part...

The technical trick is to manage this with very limited resources, with appropriate levels of control for study done within the Order and Movement, and with a prospective audience in many time zones - all without appearing fragmented in our approach...

solutions?

I've looked at a good number of approaches and, balancing out what I think is required to get us started and keep us going as thebuddhistcentre.com develops, I have some recommendations (see below).

I've been working with a company called Voicethread (<https://voicethread.com/about/features/>) to explore whether or not their solution would be suitable for us (it's aimed primarily at school/college situations). We're quite excited at the possibilities and they've agreed to a 6-month free trial for us with one of their professional-level products, in exchange for regular critical feedback. So far that's going very well indeed. It's not perfect software, but they are open to change, eager to develop what they have, and also (crucially) committed to supporting mobile devices (<https://voicethread.com/about/blog/2011/20110705/>), so it's a good fit. If you view either of their links here you'll get a good sense of what is possible with their service.

what might study look like?

In the short-term (till the new year):

Planning: we'll use Facebook, Twitter and the Triratna News blog to advertise some pilot projects. We'll use our own branded space on Doodle to plan any sessions where people will have the opportunity to discuss together online, eg. <https://thebuddhistcentre.doodle.com/tkv53p9x62qdw3a>

Course materials will be hosted as modules on Voicethread. For an initial example, see one I've made for studying the 'Section of the Enlightened One' from the *Dhammapada*: <http://voicethread.com/share/2186091/>

You can view the material as it is, or create a free account if you want to test out commenting, ask questions yourself, etc. Alternatively, with our test deal from Voicethread we have 50 Basic accounts to fill, which allow for greater scope with commenting. The accounts will still be yours to manage autonomously, but they'll be 'officially' part of thebuddhistcentre.com's presence on Voicethread. If you think you're interested in getting actively involved with setting up/leading study as part of our pilot - or at your own Centre (more on that in a bit) - then let me know and I'll assign one of the accounts to you.

For anyone curious, here are some other Buddhist modules on Voicethread: <https://voicethread.com/?#q+buddhism>

Live discussion: for many people the ability to ask questions and interact in their own time with others via commenting (video, audio, text, etc.) will be enough of a study/discussion experience. They might 'report in' via Facebook or Twitter or email about their overall experience or any conclusions when the study module is done and ready to be archived (a neat possibility with Voicethread).

However, some folk may want a concluding live discussion to augment their use of the interactive study materials. This is especially challenging to enable when you have few resources and need whatever experience you facilitate to 'feel' personal for those participating. Unfortunately, the most

common implementations involve large and expensive technical processes to set up and maintain. So for our purposes just now, we will try out the following approach:

– We'll invite concluding remarks, etc. then propose and plan small group discussions (5 max + the facilitator) by live video, using Skype. I've set up an official Skype business channel for thebuddhistcentre.com and we can enable group video on it, as well as invite any of you who have your own Skype accounts to be affiliated with us. Again, let me know. We may have to host several of these discussions per module to meet the demands of a particular group, but that allows us to be flexible in meeting people's schedules too. Facebook now supports video Skype, so it allows us to move away from disconnected text-based chat in that space without requiring the user to open a new account (though it would be better if they did as seeing group video isn't yet supported on Facebook).

In the mid/long-term (2012):

Planning: we'll still use external social networks, of course, but much of the planning for our 'centrally organised' study sessions will happen within our own social network. We hope that Centres will organise their own via their Project pages and groups (Voicethreads can be easily embedded anywhere on thebuddhistcentre.com), and that the 'Courses' section of the main site can feature this sort of approach for the Dharma Training Course and any other ongoing courses we'll host in time.

We'd love to embed Doodle within our social network as a planning tool (planning meetings is such an important part of our Movement's daily life!) but that's prohibitively expensive for now.

Unfortunately there aren't any viable alternatives available as yet. Testing a branded 'external' space on Doodle for centrally organised study sessions is, at least, a good start, and we can assign five main users to set these up. I've invited Lokabandhu and Dhammarati to take part in that wee trial as representatives of the Movement and the Order. We can also work to extend some of that functionality via shared login - ie. we could make one of our main users a communal 'Centres' user, which any Centre could access for setting up events.

Suriyavamsa is now the Dharma Teaching co-ordinator for thebuddhistcentre.com and we'll start working together in the new year with other interested folk to move towards the creation and curation of study materials for beginners' and regulars' courses for the site.

Course materials: I suspect Voicethread will remain part of our approach - it's inexpensive compared to its main competitors, quite easy for non-tech users, and (once you've grasped its limitations) quite easy to set up modules within. Its archiving features are also excellent as a resource, and its mobile support will be indispensable.

However, I've also been talking to Ruchiraketu about Moodle (www.moodle.org), which is a free 'community led' alternative to commercial online learning products. It's a technical challenge to make a big 'content management' system like Moodle work within the frame of the general system we already have in place with thebuddhistcentre.com (Drupal). But it is possible and some of what Moodle can do might mean it's a good idea to test it out. In time we may even be able to host live multi-media discussion on our own site using a system like this, though there would be considerable

technical and financial hurdles to overcome first. But it's worth investigating, and Ruchiraketu has the option of playing with Moodle on our server as and when he's able.

We'll also try to develop some features on FBA that allow users to quickly gather together meaningful study resources (bits of audio and text) on a given topic and share these with others via thebuddhistcentre.com.

Live discussion: our approach will likely have to remain the same for a while. Once Centres organise their own online study this optional step will likely be more manageable as local groups will be smaller than the larger audiences we may get for centrally organised study. But in many cases the weekly class meeting at the Centre will obviate the need for an online gathering.

There are two kinds of longer term solutions for live online learning. One uses free software like Moodle, but the considerable cost comes in setting up and maintaining your own complex system and in paying for the relatively huge amounts of bandwidth that hosting regular live video chat would entail. The other uses software (eg, Blackboard or Adobe Connect) where you embed someone else's external solution but pay very large annual amounts to do so. I think this just needs ongoing monitoring. Skype isn't a bad alternative as things stand.

a proposal about the urban retreat

This is a suggestion (mainly to Lokabandhu and Vajragupta, but also to anyone organising the retreat locally) that we maybe try out Voicethread as part of the online component in the forthcoming Urban Retreat, to be hosted on thebuddhistcentre.com. I'm happy to support you in setting up a few modest modules for all participants of the course - and see what happens... We can easily let all the Centres who're doing the course know about the modules and invite them to help us test what we put up: see if their local participants enjoy using them.

summary

I'm aware that's quite a lot to take in! And I'll be very happy to answer any questions you might have. I hope you'll see the hugely exciting potential of all this to involve people much more deeply in the Dharma through their online lives. Once you have had a chance to absorb all the information, here are the key points for our next steps:

1. Try out the test Voicethread: <http://voicethread.com/share/2186091/> I've left some comments that talk you through things, and you can view easy to follow introductory Voicethreads here: <https://voicethread.com/about/features/>

Try leaving your own comments! It's easy.

2. If you'd like to try out Voicethread in your own Centre/Tiratna Project context, or get involved in helping lead study with thebuddhistcentre.com's pilot modules, let me know.

3. If you want to try out Skype video chat as a study leader as part of our pilot modules, let me know and I'll invite you to be affiliated. If you want to try it for your own local projects you can still be affiliated but you'd need to pay for Skype group video (Skype Premium) yourself.
4. If you're involved with the Urban Retreat, consider this more comprehensive online approach.
5. Send any other thoughts you have on this to learning@thebuddhistcentre.com.

Many thanks for your time and attention on this!

with metta,

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