This paper outlines the design and development of an online learning and teaching environment named InterLearn. Designed by Monash University’s Centre for Higher Education Development to deliver its Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and other Staff Development topics, it uses a database approach to provide learners with their own ‘worksites’ and online learning activities.

Based on notions of collaborative learning and constructivist approaches, InterLearn provides students the functionality to search and read each others responses to online activities and collaborate in forming a shared understanding of ideas and concepts (Fig. 1).

Students may also edit or update their responses to activities whenever they enter their ‘worksite’, a secure and customised teaching and learning area for the student. Other functions include discussion group, news area and a maintenance module to enter student details and assign passwords and login identification (Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Activity search feature
Trialed this year in the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, interim evaluations have indicated that the approach is welcomed by course participants. Further development is now planned to incorporate Staff Development topics and remaining subjects of the Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. Initial feedback by students (themselves University teachers) to the online learning environment is encouraging with remarks such as:

“I am particularly happy with the activity system adopted in the course under different modules. The activity system allows me to build my knowledge gradually in a very flexible way. It also allows me to share others experience and gain from their experience and knowledge. Another good reason is that I can practice what I learned from others in my own class and add that experience to activities.”

“Reading the various responses of other people is a great way of getting a better picture of what the class think as a whole.”

“The opportunity to reflect about my teaching practices. This is facilitated by a good choice of online and text resources which are readily available. The flexibility of the subject delivery. It would be very difficult to attend classes on a regular basis while having to undertake all my other academic activities. I can access the subject material from any of my offices (I operate on two campuses) and from home, and because I can choose the time to undertake the activities – away from telephones and interruptions of all sorts – the reflection time is more effective.”

“The course had stimulated reflection on my own teaching practice and I can see some changes in my teaching style in response to this. It has also encouraged a small group of us to share all experiences and fostered the creation of a small “teaching” community.”

InterLearn is seen as one teaching tool that can be used to develop online learning environments that are more interactive and independent. A further outcome of the work so far is that the interactivity between students in online courses can be stimulated without adding substantially to the overall teaching load. Although the functionality of InterLearn will not be significantly extended, some minor refinements are currently being undertaken including:

1. Multiple searching of responses
2. To facilitate searching, only completed activities available if searching by name or vice versa
3. Enhanced features for activities including formatted text, tables, images, video and sound.
4. Maintenance module: Check links for validity and reporting function
5. Maintenance module: View of students completed activities for teaching staff including assessed activities

At this stage it is planned to have these refinements available in late 1999.