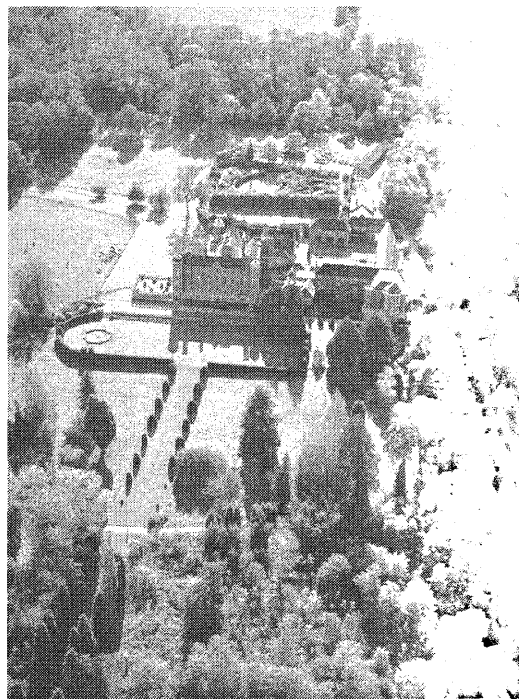


The 9th Cambridge International Conference on Open and
Distance Learning

**Supporting the Student in Open and Distance
Learning**



Collected Conference Papers
October 2001

Edited by Roger Mills and Alan Tait

Open University
Cambridge

The 9th Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning

Supporting the Student in Open and Distance Learning

Collated Conference Papers
October 2001

Edited by Roger Mills and Alan Tait

CONTENTS

Alan Tait and Roger Mills: Introduction: Supporting the Student in Open and Distance Learning	4
Louise Aylward: Constructivism or Confucianism?	8
Carol Bertram: "Students doing it for themselves": the role of informal study groups in the B.ED honours programme at the University of Natal, South Africa.....	16
Mick Campion: Student needs and support: the beginnings of an alternative view	26
N.A. Corry and A.D. Lelliott: Supporting the masses? Learner perceptions of a South African ODLprogramme.	32
Marilyn Dorman and Lorelle Burton: Helping students to manage study needs and develop generic skills through web-based learning resources	44
Anne Gaskell and Ormond Simpson: Tutors supporting students: what do students want?	52
Alan Mandell and Lee Herman: Remembering our common work: students, teachers and administrators in open learning.....	59
Vaughn John: Marginalisation removed or remodelled? A special role for learner support in transforming open and distance education in South Africa.	69
Brian Kenworthy: Supporting the student in new teaching and learning environments	76
C Kinross and C Morgan: Improving interactivity online for land management distance education students....	83
Denise Kirkpatrick: Slowing the revolving door: providing academic support for distance education learners. 94	
Sandra Land: The Tugela Terry Tango: Reflections on an education for democracy project in Kwazulu-Natal	100
Helen Lentell: The importance of the tutor in open and distance learning (ODL).....	110
Jan Mahyuddin, Alison Littler and Mary Rice: Internationalising university curriculum: responding to 'difference' in designing open and online learning environments	119
Elizabeth Manning: Providing students with a good start in open and distance learning	128
Louise McCall and Leon Piterman: Competition or collaboration: future directions for distance education providers	134
Salome Meyer: Support for culturally diverse post-basic students who receive telematic education at the Department of Nursing Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa	143
Dr Chieko Mizoue: Distance higher education and library services in Japan.....	151
Godfrey Netswera: The evaluation of tutor support in a distance learning institution.....	157
Jennifer O'Rourke: Lost and found: open learning outside the doors of academe	172
Jason Pennells: Challenges in adjusting to new technology in supporting learners in developing countries....	181
Professor V.S. Prasad: Optimizing the balance between volume, costs and quality: reflections on the IGNOU experience	190
Val J Rapmund: Supporting students in open and distance learning: guidelines for facilitators offering learner support programmes.....	202
Dr P. Sivaswaroop: Aged distance learners – perceptions and feedback on access and equity	214
Trudie Steyn: 'Did we meet your learning needs?' exploring the experience of postgraduate learners in distance education in South Africa.....	225
Peter J Weber and Michael Ribold: The international certificate in online education and training (OET) – A best practice model for virtual adult education.....	239

Introduction: Supporting the Student in Open and Distance Learning

Alan Tait and Roger Mills, Open University, UK

It is a pleasure to contribute the Foreword to this distinguished volume of papers for the Ninth Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning. Our theme on this occasion is that of learner support, which in one guise or another has underlain all the Cambridge conferences since the first on counselling in distance education in 1983.

From our perspective within the OU UK this is a time when it is not only appropriate but also necessary to revisit the assumptions on which we have developed our learner support systems over the last 30 years. The immediate context for such a review is the decline in student retention over the last 5 years of some 5%, or to put it another way, that in the teaching year 1997/8 of 166,000 registered students, 95000 completed and passed their courses (Retention Project Report 2001:1). That is a non-completion and failure rate of some 43%. Declining figures such as these, with their implications for the access mission of the OU UK, led to the establishment of the Retention Programme, a significant action research project tasked with the identification of a range of retention-supportive activities. This report makes its recommendations under four broad headings, namely:

- 1 Managing open entry: increasing student progression by rewarding achievement;
- 2 Reducing student workload;
- 3 Building stronger relationships with students: paying attention to the key role of the Associate Lecturer (tutor);
- 4 Changing the focus of funding of central academic units.

The most significant areas of attention it addresses include firstly the need to provide more obvious markers of success for students, e.g.. a student who successfully completes part but not all of the continuous assessment in a year should be able to carry forward that part to a succeeding year, rather than suffer the de-motivating experience of effectively losing all that work. Secondly, the need for course teams to manage the workload they create for students more effectively: it seems that little has been learned over the last 30 years about how student workload is created. This has been complicated by the introduction of new technologies for learning and teaching, including electronic conferencing and CD-ROM resources, where timings of workloads have in some courses been badly misleading, although at the same time recognised as effective and motivating learning resources. Thirdly, the need to embed more firmly the support that students gain from their tutor, that is in the OU UK system the part-time teacher who assesses and teaches each individual student through her or his assignments during the course. The tutor role in being able to support students through the difficulties of study is recognised as absolutely central, although at the same time the learning environments have become so complex that the tutor is less able than ever to offer comprehensive information and guidance to the learner, and needs to be supported by teams of staff involved in what is termed 'Student Services', both in the 13 Regional Centres as well as at headquarters in Milton Keynes. Lastly, faculties and schools in the university should, as the university as a whole does, receive an element of funding for student success and not just on student recruitment.

History

A little history as to how the OU UK got to where it has done is helpful at this preliminary stage. The university was remarkable in establishing itself for teaching in 1971 in recognising that one of the core ways in which it would take forward the tradition of correspondence education and revolutionise it would be to offer, alongside professionally designed multi-media teaching materials, student support, in particular through individualised tutoring and counselling, and a range of local study centres. Student support was conceived for a single programme, which was how the OU UK was originally established namely the undergraduate programme (Tait 1998). The most significant development in that overarching design has been the change of the counselling system. In OU UK terms, that is the continuing support of an educational but non-course specific kind, which in the undergraduate programme where it was developed led to the core concept of 'continuity of counselling'. The tutor a student had in his or her first year remained as the counsellor for an entire 5 or 6 year degree, thus giving an individual student a continuity of acquaintance over and above the tutor who would be specific in one year to another (see Tait 1996: 60-61 for an account of the original design of learner support in the OU UK). As the first Vice-chancellor Walter, now Lord, Perry wrote in his personal account of the OU UK;

I am sure that Robert Beevers (the first Director of Regional Tutorial Services) was fundamentally correct in deciding that students would need continuous counselling, but it was not a view that was shared widely by academics. They tended to believe that most of the advice that students would want would come best from the academic staff who were teaching them (the tutors) and that counselling would become a relatively peripheral and minor activity. This runs counter to the experience of most people who have worked in the field of adult education, where the belief is fairly general that adults need a great deal more supportive help, in areas divorced from their purely academic studies, than do students in conventional residential institutions.
Perry 1976:113

This system of continuity of counselling has been replaced by a partnership between tutors and regional centre staff which gives greater emphasis to the role of tutor for 'on-course' counselling and advice of a general nature and encourages students and tutors to contact staff in the regional centres for more specialist advice and guidance (e.g. careers advice, support for students with disabilities) The main reason for this change was the growing complexity and flexibility of the University's programmes of study making it impossible to apply a standard student support model across all programmes of study. One of the difficulties with this model is that it is clear students have almost no opportunity to get to know anyone apart from their tutor, as the student advisor is very much offering support at a distance without knowing very much about the individual student. The decline in retention can be seen as a challenge as to whether such 'light touch' relationships work in the context of adult higher education.

However, while the non-completion of students has increased over recent years, an issue which is as worrying on economic grounds as it is in human terms, as university grant from government which supports most programmes of study derives both from recruitment and completion, there are newer developments already bringing change although without any evidence yet of their impact on completion. These derive principally from the new opportunities for communication through electronic conferencing between students and

tutors, and students and each other, and secondly from the opportunities through web-based information and guidance systems, to make available to students on a 'self-help' basis more and more of what they need in more manageable and attractive ways than can be done with the production of student handbooks. The development in the Open University of the Learner's Guide, by Marion Phillips and her team, is one example of how the University is approaching this challenge (Phillips. 2001).

These offer not only opportunities to supplement what has been available, but also to change the overarching pedagogic assumptions to those that have constructivist ideas at their core, namely that students can rely less on prepared teaching materials and more on exploration of resources, creating their courses at least in some fields and at some levels to a greater extent than even before.

The known case for review

These new developments have led to a range of perceptions about the need for review already. In particular, the advent of the new technologies and their capacity to deliver interaction through e-conferencing, has fundamental implications for what we understand by 'distance' and 'near'. In particular for support services to students, these have in significant part in the OU UK as well as in other large distance teaching systems, developed regional infrastructures of study centres and regional centres, in order to be 'near' students. In other words, 'near' has been necessarily construed as meaning geographically as close as possible within the constraints of volume of students, availability of tutors, and budgets. This assumption is now challenged when tutors on small-scale electronically supported courses are already in the OU UK managed from a central location instead of through the Regional Centres. Thus reviews of what tasks should be carried out in Regional Centres in the future are under way in various places within the university, along with an examination of the divisions of labour which have obtained hitherto.

The second but related dimension of change which is already being understood, is the capacity of course teams using e-conferencing or related systems to break away from the division of labour which has created the clear distinction between 'production' and 'presentation'. Up till recently, a course team had to rely almost entirely on regionally based Staff Tutors and Senior Counsellors/Learning Support Managers to manage relationships with tutors. However, now course teams are able to provide discussion space and enquiry answering for tutors in ways that are more immediate and with a greater depth of expertise than Staff Tutors have been able in many instances to do. This of course changes the nature of the course team in presentation, giving it a new dimension of its work which impacts on the working patterns of centrally based academics, the implications of which have yet to be fully understood.

It is also true that the early pool of highly motivated students excluded by a much more restricted higher educational system has given way to a population where some 40 % are presently proceeding to university, and thus the pool of 'second chance' adult students in higher education is changing in nature to one where support, it could legitimately be suggested, is more not less important.

Conclusion

In sum, the range of issues summarised in this paper lead this writer to the conclusion that a fundamental review is needed of learner support over and above the range of suggestions for change in the Retention Programme Report. Such a review needs to begin with an assessment of the learner's world, beginning with the challenging question of 'Who is the learner?' (see Tait 2000 for discussion of a planning mechanism for learner support). The review would need to address how learner support would impact on the core issues of time; confidence; academic support; study/life conflict management; and lastly 'bonding' or 'stick', that is the acquaintance of a kind with the institution through human relationship that supports motivation and persistence. It would need to take into account the external influences on learners' lives as well as the internal levers available to the institution. In thinking through the changes necessary, those of us working in open and distance education should not neglect the excellent developmental work being undertaken in more conventional institutions (Mills 1999).

The major internal levers which can be reviewed include the work of the production course team; the work of the presentation course team; the tutor; the staff tutor; and student services staff based in regional centres and at headquarters. All of these can be mediated through a range of media. There are a range of external demands and constraints which also have to be met, including those for quality assurance driven by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, and for new developments such as personal development plans which are being introduced for all HE students in the UK. This paper suggests that this scenario demands that learner support be addressed afresh: the divisions of labour and the institutional boundaries need to be reconsidered as a whole after 30 years of broad continuity, and learner needs put back at the heart of the design process. It is in this framework that we look forward to discussion of learner support in open and distance learning contexts at this conference. This brief introduction to the situation as we see it for ourselves now gives way to the range of papers in this volume as a whole, which put a range of other issues and contexts from round the world.

References

- Mills R (1999) 'Diversity, convergence and the evolution of student support in higher education in the UK' in Tait, A and Mills, R (Eds.), 71-85, *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education*, Routledge, London and New York
- Perry W (1976) *Open University*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes
- Philips M (2001). The Learners Guide. www3.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/
- Retention Project Team (2001), *Report of the Student Retention Project 'A Strategy for Improved Student Retention'*, Internal Document OU/01/1, Open University, Milton Keynes
- Tait A (1996) 'Conversation and community: student support in open and distance learning', in Mills R and Tait A (Eds.), 59-72, *Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning*, Pitman, London
- Tait A (1998) Guidance and Counselling in the Open University, in Crawford M, Edwards E and Kydd L (Eds.) *Taking Issue: Debates in Guidance and counselling in Learning*, 115-127, Routledge, London
- Tait A (2000) Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning, *Open Learning*, 15(3) 287-299

Constructivism or Confucianism?

We have the technology ... now what shall we do with it?

Louise Aylward

Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK)

Abstract

This paper examines some of the issues that arise when a University with a strong '2nd generation' Open and Distance Education (ODE) culture, operating in a society that is technologically advanced yet still heavily influenced by its Confucian tradition, adopts, within a relatively short time, the use of new communication technologies in course delivery. In particular it looks at the likely impact on the role of OUHK tutors, and at some of the institutional decisions that will have to be made if the new technology is to be integrated successfully. Similar issues might be found in many other ODE institutions, but they become more complex when considered in the context of what is known (or thought to be known) about Hong Kong learners. Is the close association of constructivist learning approaches and new communication technologies, taken for granted in much of the ODE literature, appropriate for our learners (and our tutors)? Should we be exploring other ways of using the technology? Or can our learners' familiarity with the technology be used to entice them into new ways of learning?

Note: When the institution was first established in 1989 it was called the Open Learning Institute (OLI), but it became the Open University in 1997. For convenience, I'm going to refer to the OUHK throughout this paper.

In the beginning ... developing autonomous learners

1989, the year the OUHK (then the OLI) was established, was also the year that Nipper's identification of three generations of ODE was first published¹. However, there wasn't much talk about Nipper at the OLI, and there was no sense of being poised on the cusp of the second and third generation. It was other ODE writers of the time who influenced the institutional discourse, Holmberg and his guided didactic conversation² (in OLI manuals and documents, course materials were – and are still – often defined as a 'simulated conversation' or a 'tutorial in print'); and Peters, whose description of the industrial model was taken by some to be advocacy of its use, and who, in 1993, identified the 'lay theory' of the autonomy of the learner:

(The student is no longer forced to follow the lead of a teacher and is no longer subjected to the conformity pressure of the learning or peer group.)³

Two oppositions are present in this statement: independent learner/teacher and independent learner / peer group. I will address both in this paper but I'd first like to acknowledge that ODE discourse (perhaps any academic discourse) tends to draw us in to such oppositions – behaviourist/constructivist, independent/collaborative, intrinsic/extrinsic, individual/collective, with the implication that the paired characteristics are mutually exclusive. As Biggs and Watkins⁴, among others, have noted, these are polarities suggested by Western commentators, and may not always be appropriately applied to Asian learners.

‘The student is no longer forced to follow the lead of a teacher...’

There’s a statue of Confucius, who wrote his *Analects* 600 years ago, outside the OUHK library, reminding anyone who goes in there of the ‘Confucian tradition’, which, it is generally acknowledged, still greatly influences education in Hong Kong. The Confucian tradition is teacher-centred, with a focus on the transmission of content (Robinson⁵). In some Hong Kong educational circles, Confucian values are blamed for the perceived tendency of Hong Kong learners to rely on memorizing, rote-learning, surface learning, transmission modes of teaching and so on. These accusations are not entirely fair to Confucius, whose importance to education in Chinese culture derives from his conviction that everyone is educable⁶; and Biggs⁷ suggests that some of the learner characteristics identified as part of the Confucian tradition are oversimplified and misunderstood. However, certainly when I arrived at the OLI in 1991, the theory of the passive, rote-learning, teacher-dependent Hong Kong learner held sway.

Inevitably, perhaps, the ODE theories that predominated at the time, with their emphasis on independence and self-direction were presented as a counterpoint to some of the problematic aspects of ‘Confucian’ education. Students were told that, while at school they may have been used to being directed by teachers, now they were responsible for their own learning. They were encouraged to engage actively with the self-instructional course materials, which of course had been specially designed to promote such interaction, with objectives, activities, intext questions, feedback and so on. I’m talking in the past tense, but in fact this underlying approach still holds true today, although as the restraints of the original course design model slacken, individual course coordinators probably provide supplementary, more course-specific advice.

Another significant contrast between the two models should be highlighted: the focus on independent learning highlights individual achievement – a concept found in many western accounts of successful learning, but not as significant in the Confucian tradition, where collective values are far more important (Robinson).

Given this context, what are OUHK tutors asked to do? At present, all literature directed at students, tutors and course coordinators emphasizes that the materials are the primary source of learning; but that tutors are a very important source of support. In the tutor training manual tutors are told that they will be expected to provide this support in three ways:

- 1 Marking and commenting on their students’ assignments
- 2 Providing telephone support.
- 3 Running face to face sessions for their students.

Because as an open learning institution the OUHK must provide flexibility and choice, it is made clear that while learners are encouraged to make use of their tutor’s support, they are not obliged to do so. Student must be free to choose to study a course and achieve a pass in assessment without ever consulting their tutor. In some cases, therefore, the learner-tutor relationship exists solely in the dialogue in which the student submits an assignment, and the tutor comments on it. Nevertheless, much effort is put into persuading students and training tutors to make face-to-face (f2f) sessions worthwhile learning experiences. Fung and Carr note:

As in many other distance education institutions, the OUHK advocates that tutorials should be participatory events, not straight lectures, and the message is strongly reinforced in the staff development sessions/materials for tutors.⁸

In other words, the tutorials are intended to continue the 'active learning' approach adopted in the course materials. The students, however, are not always enthusiastic about this approach. The same study indicates that 'straight lecture' is what a lot of them prefer. They want their tutors to interpret the course materials, select the key points, tell them what to learn. Furthermore, there is evidence that many tutors feel obliged to provide the straight lecture, particularly in the foundation level courses.

This may appear to reinforce theories of the Hong Kong passive learner (though Fung and Carr point out that similar results have been arrived at in other surveys of other institutions)⁹. However, it's worth noting that another characteristic of Hong Kong learners identified by researchers is that they are 'strong on cue-seeking'¹⁰. If they perceive a gap between what they are asked to do in theory, and what they are required to do in practice, they will choose the second option.

Kember¹¹ suggests that one explanation for Asian students' apparent addiction to rote learning is:

... they could be doing it because they perceive that this is what their courses expect them to. This is particularly likely to happen if the course writers and tutors believe that is all they are capable of.

Could there be something in this? One of the reasons we provide inclusive study units rather than a list of resources is that we can't guarantee those resources would be available to all students. But however hard we try to produce materials that provide multiple perspectives and engage students in active learning through the familiar devices, conversational style etc. it is quite hard to write a text that does not present as authoritative. Indeed, it could be argued that the fact it is a printed text *makes* it authoritative.

It also has to be said that, on the whole, tutors as well as students have come through the Hong Kong education system. As an academic who came out from the UK in the early days of the OLI to conduct training sessions remarked to me: 'I expended a lot of effort in Hong Kong trying to get tutors to give what I regarded as student-centred sessions, and failed basically because neither tutors nor students believed in my value system for tutorial contact.'

This does not mean that either students or tutors were necessarily promoting surface learning. Marton et al¹² maintain that memorization (rather than rote-learning) is one of the methods that Chinese students use to move towards understanding. It's easy to see how this learning technique would transfer well to the processing of printed ODE course materials. And OUHK tutors, often f2f teachers in other Hong Kong institutions, and so used to teaching within the Confucian context, are probably sympathetic to this approach.

So what do we have? A distinctly 2nd generation ODE institution, with the (Western) concept of the autonomous learner embedded in the University's official culture to the extent that, for some OUHK personnel, it is inseparable from the concept of ODE itself. Tutors and students who have a different cultural background, one that includes the collective being valued over the individual, and an emphasis on respect for the teacher and the authority within a text. The

whole a kind of hybrid, not the Western ideal of the individual, not the Confucian ideal of the collective, but something between the two.

Bring on the new technology

The decision to introduce new technologies into course delivery at the OUHK was taken in 1998 and after that, things moved fairly quickly. In 1999 the OUHK adopted Web CT as its online learning platform (in the OUHK it is referred to as the Online Learning Environment – OLE) and a number of courses were selected in each School for the pilot presentations in 2000 and 2001. With the exception of one or two courses at the technological end of the spectrum), the Web CT platform was added on to existing courses, as an additional means of student support. So far it has been very difficult to persuade course coordinators to make access to the Internet compulsory for learners on their courses, the main reason cited being concerns about excluding some students. These concerns, however, are not borne out by results of a survey in March 2001, which indicated that 97% of respondents have access to computers, 94% have Internet access, 50% have 56K modems and 35% have broadband. These figures – not particularly surprising in Hong Kong, which is a technologically oriented place and has free local phone calls – seem to indicate that whatever the obstacles to introducing CMC, problems with student access are not among them.

Nevertheless, as might have been predicted, introducing the OLE as a kind of optional extra has not been a huge success. System administrators report low traffic, and course coordinators bear this out, saying that use of discussion boards is limited. They and the tutors currently bear much of the burden for motivating students to use the technology. In the current version of the tutor's manual, tutors are encouraged to use the tools in the online delivery system: discussion boards, newsgroups, email and chat. They are told that their duties as a tutor supporting an online course may include the following:

- Leading discussions and answering questions on the discussion board.
- Organizing online tutorials
- Handling tutor-marked assignments online
- Answering emails.

There follows a checklist of guidelines for e-moderating, which is similar to (but not as extensive as) the principles suggested by Salmon.¹³

No one at the OUHK thinks that this is adequate preparation for tutors; it is just a start, as the introduction of the technology itself is just a start. But what are we going to expect them to do, and what changes need to be made in order to enable them to do it? This, of course, is another way of asking how we intend to develop our courses now that we have the new technologies available. Clearly, the technology will have to be integrated properly with the courses: two of the reasons students gave in the survey for *not* contributing to the discussion boards were, participation is not compulsory and it doesn't count towards assessment. This doesn't necessarily mean that they should be dismissed as students with extrinsic motivation. Biggs remarks:

Even more basic are those very Confucian 'internal dispositions [that] create a sense of diligence and receptiveness; (Hess and Azuma 1991: p. 7) that would certainly help make academic activities 'meaningful and worthwhile', in a way that leaves the more

familiar American concept of intrinsic motivation standing. In short the familiar extrinsic/intrinsic polarity collapses.¹⁴

The pedagogy of online learning

‘The student ... is no longer subjected to the conformity pressure of the learning or peer group’

S/he is now! Which is a good thing in some ways. While some learners choose ODE specifically because they want to work alone, it does seem likely that feelings of isolation are at least one of the courses for the high dropout rate that is seen as one of the major drawbacks of traditional distance learning programmes.¹⁵ The insistence on individual learning in 2nd generation ODE may be to some extent a defensive strategy; and efforts to provide summer schools and f2f tutorials to some extent compromise it. However, one of the other virtues of distance education is supposed to be its flexibility, and, speaking as an ODE student (on the OUUK MA in Open and Distance Learning), I can vouchsafe that this is seriously reduced by a requirement to participate in online collaborative activities. It does seem significant that some of the ‘gurus’ of online learning (e.g. Harasim, Collis) come from traditional tertiary institutions, and on the whole, are dealing with full-time learners and comparing the online experience with f2f teaching. Time is therefore on their side, and online learning defined in their terms is very time-consuming, partly because it is almost always assumed that the most effective online learning is constructivist and collaborative. For example, Jonassen¹⁶ (cited by Murphy¹⁷) writes:

Contemporary conceptions of technology-supported learning environments assume the use of a variety of computer-mediated communications to support collaboration among communities of learners ... Learning most naturally occurs not in isolation but by teams of people working together to solve problems. CLEs should provide access to shared information and shared knowledge-building tools to help learners to collaboratively construct social shared knowledge.

And Harasim states:

Collaborative learning models the conversation by which communities of knowledgeable peers construct knowledge.

With collaborative learning, students learn to construct knowledge as it is constructed in the knowledge communities they hope to join upon graduation.¹⁸

I think this statement is arguable. It may work in North America and in the current climate of globalization but is possibly not applicable globally. For example, students in Hong Kong focusing entirely on the work communities they hope to join might be well advised to retain the Confucian approach (incidentally, it is interesting, now that China is a potential market, to see the array of teaching material on the cultural aspects of doing business in China).

There’s more to learning than getting a job, however. There are undoubtedly pros (and cons) to a constructivist approach – and I’m not proposing to argue them in this paper. However, taking a pragmatic perspective, it seems unlikely – well probably impossible – that such an approach could be adopted in the short-term at the OUHK. We are not in a position to redevelop all our courses immediately; and there would be a fair amount of re-education necessary if we were to attempt to do so. As new courses come on line, and old ones are

revised, perhaps we will gradually move towards a constructivist model. But perhaps we won't? We have the technology; it may be possible to use the transition period to find out how best to use it.

Returning to the Confucian tradition, it is clear that Hong Kong students do value connection with their fellows (in a focus group discussion in March 2001, several noted that they actively sought such connection and found it beneficial). Whether they would go so far as to feel they could learn constructively from their peers is another issue. But it does seem worth exploring the possibilities of connection; if only to with a view to what else is possible. Here Bernard et al's interesting distinction between collaborative and collective learning seems relevant.

In cooperative learning, the result may simply add to a collection or incorporation of each individual's work into the final product. However final products based on collaborative should represent a synthesis of the whole.¹⁹

Cooperative learning is dismissed; but given what we know about Hong Kong learners, perhaps it should be revisited? Certainly it seems worth taking our time; focusing on our learners and what their tutors have to say about them, before making major commitments to approaches that may not be suitable. Collaboration = constructivism may be a difficult message for learners who value the authority of the teacher; co-operation with fellow students, on the other hand, would probably be a welcome approach.

An interim measure (between abandoning old courses and developing new ones) might be to review current courses with a view to preserving the content but re-engineering the activities and linking them more effectively to the assessment tasks. This would provide motivation for students, and at the same time, give the OUHK a space in which to observe the way its students use the technology once given a real reason for doing so.

So, back to the tutors. They seem to get sidelined in a lot of the issues, but are key to any kind of change. Even such a moderate shift would require a lot of effort from them, and therefore the University would have to consider appropriate support. Some of the issues requiring consideration are:

Training

Salmon recommends online training for emoderators, and this seems sensible. The OUHK could develop an e-moderating training programme for a cohort of tutors, who on graduation could possibly become tutors in future presentations of the emoderating programme.

Balance of Face to Face and online

Research indicates that, for Hong Kong students, a f2f session is valuable to promoting online communication.

Chinese students (and perhaps other Asian students with a similarly Confucian heritage) may be unwilling to make significant personal commitments to an online learning environment, wishing to avoid self-disclosure and commitment to 'strangers'. Online courses presented in these cultural settings must include carefully structured and motivated plans for online interactions. Course designers cannot expect such interaction to emerge spontaneously, or to remain 'on campus' if it does. This might be reflected in more highly structured, task-oriented online environments where students felt less pressure to 'hold their own' in wide-open exchanges. In addition, the use of methods such as initial face-to-face meetings and smaller online groups might

help Asian/Chinese students feel comfortable 'being themselves' in later online interactions, and in encouraging them to commit themselves to online collaborative work.²⁰

The number of f2f tutorials may have to be reduced, but it seems that, for some time to come, it will be necessary to start off with f2f tutorials if online communication is to succeed at all.

Tutor:student ratio

This will have to be reviewed. At present, tutor groups have 30 or 40 students, depending on the level of the course. If e-moderating is to be taken seriously, tutor group numbers will have to be reduced.

Assessment

Because assessment is so important, the OUHK (like other distance learning institutions) has fixed assessment procedures and processes. Tutor-marked assignments are central to the system. They were designed to fit the second generation model, and impose constraints on attempts to break away from it. However, if CMC is to be genuinely integrated into OUHK courses, assessment will have to be reassessed at an institutional level, and tutors, who may end up taking up more responsibility for assessment (it's harder to give guidelines for online or even group assessment activities) will need to be prepared.

Time

The OUHK has not yet addressed the issue of time allocation to e-moderating. E moderating probably takes up more time; but practitioners use it effectively. It's therefore worth learning the skills properly.

Remuneration

This needs to be reviewed in the light of likely time spent on line. At present, tutors are paid an 'honorarium' for adding e-moderating to their other duties. This is inadequate, and can only be a temporary solution.

Conclusion

The OUHK adopted 2nd generation ODE theories as its pedagogical basis when it opened in 1989, and they have become part of its official culture, although it is clear that students and tutors find ways of subverting this culture to suit their own learning attitudes and needs. Perhaps because the 2nd generation culture was established so successfully, when new and emerging technologies became available, debate about their use was slow to develop. Now, though, as it becomes evident that these technologies cannot just be 'added on', there is ongoing discussion about their implementation. It is by no means clear that the OUHK should simply strive to become a '3rd generation' ODE university, taking on board current pedagogical theories, without additional enquiry. Such theories have been developed by Western academics teaching Western students. If simply imposed on our context (and come to that on any other Asian, or non-Western context) without examination, there is a good chance that they will be subverted to suit local needs. It may be better then, to focus on the strengths of CMC as they are likely to be experienced by Hong Kong (or other non-Western) learners, and build on those strengths and traditions, with a view to adapting current theory and available technology to provide appropriate, learner-centred courses.

References

- ¹ Nipper, S (1989) 'Third generation distance learning and computer conferencing', in R Mason and A Kaye, *Mindweave*, Milton Keynes: Open University, <http://www-icdl.open.ac.uk/mindweave/chap5.html>, verified 5 July 2001
- ² Holmberg, B. (1989) *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, London: Routledge,
- ³ Peters O., (1993) 'Understanding distance education', in K. Harry, M. John and D. Keegan (eds.) *Distance Education: New Perspectives*, London: Routledge, p. 15
- ⁴ Biggs, J. and Watkins, D. (1996) 'The Chinese learner in retrospect' in D. A. Watkins and J. R. Biggs (eds.) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Hong Kong: CERC and ACER, p. 273
- ⁵ Robinson, B. (1999) 'Asian learners, Western models: some discontinuities and issues for distance educators' in R. Carr, O. J. Jegede, T. M. Wong and K. S. Yuen (eds.), *The Asian Distance Learner*, Hong Kong: OUHK Press
- ⁶ Lee, W.O. (1996) 'The cultural context for Chinese learners: Conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition' in D. A. Watkins and J. R. Biggs, *op. cit.*, p. 28
- ⁷ Biggs, J. (1996) 'Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture' in D. A. Watkins and J. R. Biggs, *op. cit.*, p. 53
- ⁸ Fung, Y. and Carr, R. (1999) 'Tutorials in a distance education system' in R. Carr, O. J. Jegede, T. M. Wong and K. S. Yuen, *op. cit.*, p. 151
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.162
- ¹⁰ Biggs, J. and Watkins, D., *op. cit.*, p. 282
- ¹¹ Kember, D (1999) 'The learning experience of Asian students: a challenge to widely held beliefs' in R. Carr, O. J. Jegede, T. M. Wong and K. S. Yuen, *op. cit.*, p. 90
- ¹² Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G. and Tse, L. K. (1996), 'Memorising and understanding: The keys to the paradox?' in D. A. Watkins and J. R. Biggs, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-83
- ¹³ Salmon, G (2000) *E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, London: Kogan Page, p. 125
- ¹⁴ Biggs, J., *op. cit.*, p. 273
- ¹⁵ Bernard, R. M. de Robulcava, B. R. and St-Pierre, D. (2000), 'Collaborative online distance learning: Issues for future practice and research', *Distance Learning*, 21 (2), pp. 260-275
- ¹⁶ Jonassen. D. (1998) 'Designing constructivist learning environments', in C.M. Reigeluth (ed.) *Instructional Theories and Models*, 2nd Ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- ¹⁷ Murphy, D. (1999) 'Still "Getting the Mixture Right": Increasing interaction on the Internet' in R. Mills and A. Tait, *Collected papers of the 8th Cambridge Conference on Open and Distance Learning*, p. 104
- ¹⁸ Harasim, L. (2001) The Future of (e)Learning. Keynote Address at CAL 2001. (http://www.telelearn.ca/g_access/harasim_presentations/cal2001/sld008.htm) verified 5 July 2001
- ¹⁹ Bernard, R. M. et al. *op.cit.*, p. 262
- ²⁰ Vermeer, R (1999), 'Online Identity and Learning in the Design of a Tertiary-level Distance Education Course' (H803 dissertation)

“Students doing it for themselves”: the role of informal study groups in the B.ED honours programme at the University of Natal, South Africa

Carol Bertram
School of Education, Training and Development
University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Introduction

The current challenges in teacher education in South Africa demand flexible teacher education programmes which will enable teachers to continue working while they study (Welch, 2001).

This study is based on research is located within one such programme, the B.Ed Honours programme which is offered by the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, traditionally a contact university. The programme has been delivered through ‘mixed-mode’ since January 1999 at 27 Learning Centres around the country. ‘Mixed-mode’ signifies the use of printed course material *and* tutorial sessions, in contrast to much distance teacher education, which is only by correspondence.

Students (who are full-time teachers) complete 8 courses or modules, usually over a period of 2 years, studying part-time. Many students are members of informal study groups who meet together to discuss their studies. Hodgson calls these “self help groups” (1993:110). We interviewed students to explore the benefits of these groups, and more recently to try to understand better the learning processes within the groups. This paper focuses on the findings of these interviews.

What student support systems do we have in place?

One way of understanding the term ‘student support’ is the range of activities which complement the mass-produced learning materials (Tait, 1995: 232). Simpson (2000:6) suggests that student support falls into two broad areas: academic (or tutorial) support and non-academic (or counselling) support. In this paper I will focus on the academic student support within the B.Ed Honours programme.

The first step to planning any student support is to know who your students are (Tait, 1995: 233). The new National Qualifications Framework allows teachers with a four year diploma from a teacher training college entry into the B.Ed Hons (which had previously been open only to teachers with University degrees). The vast majority of students (84%) do not have a degree, but enter with a four year diploma. 75% of the students are women and 66% of them are primary school teachers. Only 7% have English (which is the medium of instruction) as their home language. Half the students are between the ages of 31 and 40 (Bertram, 2000a).

Formal tutorial sessions

Perraton (1995:182) states that “the measures we need to take to raise the quality of a process of distance education all increase interaction between students and tutors or amongst

students...” With this in mind, as well as an understanding of who our students are, the B.Ed Hons programme chose to support students with four formal tutorial sessions of six hours each, per module.

The programme expects students to have worked through a particular section of the course, by doing the in-text tasks and come to the tutorial ready to articulate their learning, and to apply it to different scenarios. Tutors¹ are not expected to lecture the course material, but to facilitate various activities which provide opportunities for students to articulate their understanding and discuss issues with other students. As course developers, we hope that tutorials will enable students to move beyond simply knowing information, to being able to understand and apply the information in different situations. Tutorial sessions give students the opportunity to meet with other students.

Academic support external to the institution

An end-semester course evaluation which was administered to all students within KwaZulu Natal in June 2000 (Bertram, 2000a) showed that of the 796 students answering the questionnaire, 70% were part of an informal study group, and of these, 25% met every weekday. It became clear that informal study groups constituted another key area of student support.

There is not much literature on student support outside the formal structures of the institution. There are suggestions that there are three sources of support outside the formal structures of the institution: namely from partners, families and friends; from other students and from employers (Simpson, 2000: 101). In a small scale survey at the Open University, students rated support from partners and friends more highly than support from tutors and other students. In the B.Ed Hons programme, students find support from other students by setting up small informal groups that provide them with academic support and encouragement. The rest of this paper examines the learning processes that take place within these groups.

Methodology

The data are taken from two sets of interviews with members of informal study groups. We seldom interviewed the whole study group. Sometimes group members arrived during the interview, or during the learning process we were observing. Thirty students who were members of nine groups were interviewed. The ratio of men to women was 1:3 which is fairly representative of the student cohort as a whole.

The first set of five interviews were conducted in April-May 2000². The purpose of these was to get a more detailed understanding of students' experience of the B.Ed programme, with a focus on how the delivery mode aids (or hinders) their learning (see Bertram, 2000b).

¹ Tutors are usually teachers or education lecturers with a B.Ed Hons qualification. They have other full time employment.

² Dr Fred Barasa interviewed students with me in 2000, and Ms Nonhlanhla Mthiyane interviewed students with me in 2001.

The second set of four interviews took place in April 2001, and had a stronger focus on understanding how learning takes place within the informal group. The interviewers were both co-ordinators³ of modules that students were currently studying. After we interviewed students, we observed them working together.

The informal groups who were interviewed were self-selected. Tutors asked students in their tutorial groups, who were members of an informal study group, to volunteer to be interviewed. In this sense the sampling was biased, as it excludes those not present at the formal tutorial sessions. The groups were interviewed at the venues where they usually met.

Table 1: Profile and number of students interviewed

Year	Meeting place of informal group	Number interviewed	Gender	Home language	Observation of groups
2000	St Patrick's School, Kokstad (250 kms)*	3	3 men	2 Xhosa 1 Zulu	No
	Student's home, Pietermaritzburg	2	2 women	2 Zulu	No
	Umlazi library (85 kms)	2	2 women	2 Zulu	No
	Thomas Moore School, Pinetown (70 kms)	4	2 men 2 women	4 English	No
	Indhlovana School, Greytown (80 kms)	5	5 women	5 Zulu	No
2001	Lambert Wilson library, Pietermaritzburg	3	3 women	3 Zulu	Yes
	Manaye Adult Centre, Pietermaritzburg	4	2 men 2 women	4 Zulu	Yes
	Mpumalanga township (40 kms)	4	2 men 2 women	4 Zulu	Yes
	Tembaletu Community Hall, Pietermaritzburg	3	2 women 1 man	3 Zulu	No
	TOTAL NO. OF GROUPS = 9	30	20 women 10 men	2 Xhosa 4 English 24 Zulu	3 groups observed

* The kilometres in brackets indicates the distance from the University in Pietermaritzburg. The venues in Pietermaritzburg lie within 5 - 10 kms from the University.

What learning happens in the informal group?

Moore (1993: 20) writes that there are three different learning interactions that occur in distance education. One is *learner-content* interaction - the interaction between the learner and the subject of study, which hopefully results in understanding, and not merely in rote memorisation of text. Another is *learner-teacher* interaction - the interaction between the learner and the 'expert' who prepared the materials, or a person with some expertise who is acting as instructor or tutor. In this situation the teacher stimulates interest and motivation and organises activities which would deepen understanding. Another interaction is *learner - learner* interaction, where students talk to one another about what they are learning.

³ A module co-ordinator takes responsibility for the academic integrity of a course by training tutors, managing tutors, setting assignment tasks and exams, moderating assignments and leading the panel marking of assignments and exams.

The type of learning that happens within the group depends very much on the frequency of their meeting. Of the nine informal groups, six groups meet every weekday afternoon for one to three hours, after school and often daily during the school holidays. Three groups meet once or twice a month, with a particular focus on discussing the assignment tasks and on examination preparation.

In three of the informal study groups interviewed, students' first interaction with the material is in their informal study group. They do not read the material on their own first. The individual study that these students do takes place **after** group discussions, when they go home and write the activities in their own words. Thus there is no initial *learner-content* interaction, or in fact no 'internal didactic conversation' to use Holmberg's term (in Moore, 1993:20). In a sense this adds another dimension to Moore's idea: a learner-learner-content interaction replaces the individual learner-content interaction! This situation contradicts the design rationale of the programme, which expects students to interact with material on their own to gain personal mastery of the concepts.

In other groups, members work through the material on their own in preparation for discussion in the informal group. In three of the groups, each member is given a part of the course to prepare and present at the group meeting. In this case a student would only read parts of the course material, and the other parts would be explained to him or her by other group members. Again, this subverts the design rationale in that students are not necessarily gaining mastery of the course as an integrated whole.

Membership of the groups

Most groups were formed when students met colleagues or acquaintances at the formal contact sessions. This is the benefit of a programme which is well subscribed. There are about 800 students currently on the programme in the province of KwaZulu Natal, which has nine Learning Centres. Thus it is relatively easy for students to connect up with other teachers on the same programme.

It seems quite common that first year students would join a group of students who were in their second year. First year students benefit from the experience of the second years as well as being provided with easy access to past exam papers. Although membership does seem to be quite stable, a pre-requisite is that a group is functioning well. One student told us that she left a group that she saw as "non-functioning" to join her present group. In another group, the pre-requisite for membership is that everyone is committed and is prepared to work hard.

The benefits of the informal groups

It was clear from all the groups interviewed that the groups offered both academic support and non-academic or moral support.

⁴ This group comprised all women, and the message was that men do not have time or commitment to work every afternoon, and thus only come to the group when they have problems. Three of the groups comprised only women, but there is not sufficient data to make any comments about gender issues in these informal groups.

a) **Academic support**

The groups that did all the in-text activities and reading together found it a help to do so in the group. A number of students said that they often did not understand ideas when they read at home, but the group helped them to understand.

*"Alone you are lost, you are just reading..." (and by implication, not understanding)
"We help each other to understand the difficult things." "We argue about things until we come to a common understanding of a concept."*

One group member mentioned that everyone in the group brought different skills to the group: some could find the facts, some could analyse better.

Students do believe that the informal groups help them to achieve good marks. One teacher from the Greytown group said that she failed her first semester courses because she was working on her own, but passed the second semester because she began working with the study group. A student from Umlazi said that the informal group helped her to pass her exams.

It was also mentioned that group members often belong to different formal tutorial groups, and thus can share the ideas that they have learned from different tutors. The study groups also provide self-made deadlines for students which keep them on track with their work.

b) **Non-academic support**

For all the groups interviewed, the groups provide encouragement and support.

"Other members motivate you when you want to drop out of the course".

One group mentioned that the emotional support went beyond studying on the programme.

"We meet Monday to Thursday evening from 6 - 9pm. Our families have to sacrifice. ... We are now all friends. If one person has a problem we go to her and help her - we have become friends and family. Just recently one of us lost her brother - we have been there, helping her."

A feeling of isolation is one of the reasons for the high drop-out and failure rate of distance courses (Fraser and van Staden 1996), and obviously the informal groups play a key affective role in making students feel part of a group of learners. This is particularly important for students who may not get support at home (see John, 2000:5).

Learning in formal tutorial groups

Most groups felt that their learning was supported by attending *both* the formal tutorial sessions and being part of an informal group. However, four groups felt that they learned the most in their informal groups. One group felt that their informal group was better because

"all of us are committed. In the formal tut session, sometimes you are discussing with people who are not prepared. They are blank and they expect you to explain to them. In our (informal study) group, there are no parasites."

Another group said that tutorial sessions were useful in terms of seeing other people's views and experiences, but academically, the tutorials were not necessary, as the study materials were sufficient.

All the other groups said that the formal tutorials were very useful - primarily for clarifying concepts, as well as for sharing ideas with other students. The tutor was seen as the important person who would “*sort out our confusions for us*”. They said that the course could not be successful without the tutorial sessions.

“I would struggle if there were no tut session. It makes it more user-friendly when you know that this day I will sit with somebody who has an idea, who will guide us and give direction. Otherwise it would be ... just a correspondence course.”

One student said that the main thing she had gained from the course was the confidence to talk in English in front of other adults, which was a direct result of the discussions in the formal tutorial sessions.

Observation of the informal groups in action

Only three groups were observed learning together. One group simply read through a portion of the study material together, clarifying concepts as they went along, and linking ideas to concepts previously encountered in the material.

The other two groups we observed were discussing the major assignment task for their module *Assessment in Education*. The first part of the task was to “discuss what you consider to be the five most important principles of holistic outcomes-based assessment”.

In the second group we observed, there were seven⁵ students in the group who initially discussed the topic in twos and threes. Everyone appeared to be looking through the study material for the heading which listed “five principles”. It appeared fairly unstructured and there was no indication of students reaching any clarity or consensus. After 15 minutes, Nonhlanhla (a co-ordinator of the *Assessment* course) intervened and gave some guidance by advising students that they would not find a list called “principles” in the material, but that they needed to extrapolate the key principles from the study material.

The third group we observed were also discussing this assignment task. There were five students, two of whom did not contribute to the discussion. Seemingly last time they had agreed that the principles of assessment were the same as the “five dimensions of assessment” (from Rowntree, 1987) which are listed in the study material. Just as the previous group had done, they were looking for a heading which listed the “five principles of outcomes-based assessment”, and the “five dimensions” was the closest they could find. One group member had an idea about including the multiple intelligences, but the group held to the idea that they needed to use the “five dimensions”. In fact his idea was on the right track, had it been explored and taken further. Nonhlanhla intervened after about 15 minutes, and explained that they needed to review all the study material and extract the key principles themselves. The students struggled to understand the concept of principles and how these could be drawn out of the text as a whole.

⁵ Although we interviewed only four group members at the Manaye Adult Centre, three others arrived at the end of the interview. Thus seven were present during the observation.

A fourth group whom we interviewed after the assignment was submitted, told us they had spent a whole week looking for the list of “principles” in the study material. Finally the fourth group whom we interviewed after the assignment was submitted, told us they had spent a whole week looking for the list of “principles” in the study material. Finally they decided to list five methods of assessment such as group work, essays, projects, etc. This group was angry at the University for setting an assignment “*so they would fail*”. They were not happy about us observing them working together.

Discussion of key themes

Informal study groups seem to epitomise collaborative learning principles and show that learners are taking responsibility for their own learning. Students are convinced about the effectiveness and benefits of studying together, and yet our observations seem to suggest that the groups were less than helpful in making sense of an assignment topic. A number of concepts may help to make sense of these data: the educational background of students, their cognitive academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1984), a disjuncture between University and student expectations of the course and the approaches of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning.

The deep and surface approach to learning was first introduced by Marton and Säljö in the 1970s. Ramsden(1988) provides a summary of the two approaches:

Deep approach	Surface approach
<i>Intention to understand</i>	<i>Intention to complete learning task assignments</i>
Focus on “what is signified” (e.g. the author’s arguments)	Focus on “the signs” (e.g. the text itself)
Relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge	Focus on discrete elements
Relate concepts to everyday experience	Memorise information and procedures for assessment.
Organise and structure content	Unreflectively associate concepts and facts
	Treat learning task as an external imposition
Internal emphasis: ‘A window through which aspects of reality become visible and more intelligible’	External emphasis: ‘Demands of assessment, knowledge cut off from everyday reality’

(Ramsden, 1988: 19)

I want to suggest that the University requires a deep learning approach, but that the three groups dealing with the *Assessment in Education* assignment, took a surface approach. The assignment demanded that students go beyond ‘the signs’, and extrapolate the principles from the material as a whole. Students were unable to do so, and looked instead for the discrete elements. Clearly the numerical cue of “five” was important for students. Their previous study experiences primed them to look for a list in the material with the number “five” in it. In particular, the group who ended up listing assessment methods in their assignment, saw the task as an external imposition, with no thought as to how it may improve their own teaching practice.

There are many reasons for this. Many teacher training colleges, where these students initially studied, favoured atomistic approaches to assessment which focused on content memorisation. The majority of our students (86%) have studied via distance before, and these learning experiences too were characterised by print materials designed in a didactic, content-

centred manner, with a lack of face-to-face tutorial support for students (Butcher, 1996:10). Thus students' previous learning experience has not demanded more than a surface approach.

This is these students' first opportunity at University study and they have not gained the academic discourse which is tentative and uncertain, and privileges abstractions such as "principles". Students did not see that there was any conceptual difference between "dimensions" and "principles". They have not gained the "cultural capital" (Morgan, 1995: 58) of the university. Whereas undergraduates have three or four years to learn academic discourse and conventions, these students have only two years of part time study. Since many have weak cognitive applied language proficiency (see Cummins, 1984) in both reading and writing, they struggle to learn the discourse through print.

It is clear that the groups are vital from an affective perspective: they provide students with encouragement and support. From an academic perspective, the groups do seem to help students to achieve a certain level of learning: to know the content and to pass the exam. Vygotsky believed that all higher mental processes are generated through mediation (Gouws, 1998:78). In the groups we observed, none of the students was able to play the role of an 'expert other' to in order to move the students into their zone of proximal development, and they seemed unable to access the learning material to play this role. Thus, in a worst case scenario, students are simply sharing their ignorance and not moving forward at all, though I do not suggest that this happens in all groups.

There is little evidence that the groups support students in developing deep approaches to learning which are advocated by the School of Education. The programme wants students to develop critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, as well as the ability to reflect on their own practice in the light of what they are learning (Bertram, 1999:2). Some of the learning that happens in informal study groups may in fact mitigate against students developing these skills. The student in the group who attempted to add in a different idea, was overruled by the group as a whole. There is an indication of "group think" that the majority view will prevail (even if it is wrong). The study groups may not necessarily be fostering *individual* responsibility and autonomy. The groups may in fact be hindering students from becoming independent and self-reliant learners, particularly when students substitute learning on their own with learning in their informal group. At worst, the weaker students simply copy the answers to in-text activities from the others, without real understanding. If students do not engage with the material at all as individuals, the possibility of them using their understanding to reflect on their own practice seems remote.

At an assessment level, preparation for assignments in groups may mean that some students have not thought through a problem or idea at all themselves, but are simply writing down what the group decided. This method might usually work well for students (though it did not in the case of the *Assessment in Education* task!), but may not be in the best interests of the School of Education's goal of developing an individual's reflective competence. A course co-ordinator tells of individuals who are amazed that they have failed an assignment because "everyone else in the group passed, but we wrote the same thing, we did everything together" (N.Mthiyane, pers. comm. 27/05/01).

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with data from 9 interviews with informal study groups, and three observations of groups learning together. While the informal groups are wide spread and show student's dedication and commitment to the programme, much of this learning time is not used very profitably. These informal groups have positive benefits on an affective level, and possibly on a surface learning level, but probably do not support a deep learning approach.

The data seem to suggest that for some students, the course material and the formal tutorial sessions are not sufficient to develop their conceptual understanding, academic discourse skills, their cognitive applied language proficiency and a deep learning approach. Some of the informal groups do not appear to be helping students to develop these competences either. The School of Education needs to offer more support to students in this regard. It may be that this can only be done through some face-to-face interaction. This was only a small study and it would be useful to do more research with other informal groups to gain greater insight into the learning processes of other informal groups. A very thorough evaluation of how students interact with the study materials would be useful for course developers to know how these competences could be developed through the material.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Fred Barasa and Ms Nonhlanhla Mthiyane for interviewing students with me in 2001. John Aitchison, Nonhlanhla Mthiyane, Cass Lubisi, Carol Thomson, Elizabeth Mattson and Volker Wedekind read drafts of this paper and gave useful comments.

References

- Bertram, C. (2000a) Student Evaluation of the UN/SACTE B.Ed: June 2000. Unpublished report. School of Education, Training and Development, University of Natal.
- Bertram, C. (2000b) A mixed mode distance education model for teacher education: rationale, student experiences and quality. Presented at the second NADEOSA conference "Southern African Models of Distance Education". 21, 22 August 2000, Pretoria.
- Butcher, N. (1996) The investigation of teacher education at a distance in South Africa. *Open Learning through Distance Education*, 2 (1).
- Cummins, J. (1984) *Bilingualism and Special Education: Issues in Assessment and Pedagogy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fraser, W.J. and van Staden, C.J.S. (1996) Students' opinions on factors influencing drop out rates and performance at distance education institutions. *South African Journal of Education*, 16 (4).
- Gouws, A. (1998) From social interaction to higher levels of thinking. In N. Kruger and H. Adams (eds) *Psychology for teaching and learning*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.
- Hodgson, B. (1993) *Key terms and issues in open and distance learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- John, V. (2000) Learner support needs within the UN/SACTE distance programme: towards broader and more formalised support. Paper presented at the second NADEOSA conference, Pretoria, 21 -22 August 2000.
- Morgan, A.R. (1995) Student learning and students' experiences: research, theory and practice. In F. Lockwood (ed.) *Open and Distance Learning Today*. London: Routledge.

- Moore, M.G. (1993) Three types of interaction. In K. Harry, M. John and D. Keegan *Distance Education: new perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Perraton, H.D. (1995) Quality in Distance Education. In *One World, Many Voices: Quality in Open and Distance Learning*. Selected papers from the 17th World Conference of the International Council for Distance Education, Birmingham, United Kingdom, June 1995, ed. D. Sewart. Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University
- Ramsden, P. (1988) *Improving Learning: New Perspectives*. London: Kogan Page.
- Rowntree, D. (1987) *Assessing students: How shall we know them?* London: Kogan Page.
- Simpson, O. (2000) *Supporting students in open and distance learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Tait, A. (1995) Student support in open and distance learning. In F. Lockwood (ed.) *Open and Distance Learning Today*. London: Routledge.
- Welch, T. (2001) The need for flexibility of provision in the professional development of teachers. *Open Learning through Distance Education*. March 2001, Vol 7, no.1.

Student needs and support: The beginnings of an alternative view

**Associate Professor Mick Campion,
The School of Social Inquiry
Murdoch University**

Abstract

In the first section of this paper I outline Bradshaw's typology of needs with a view to problematising the seemingly straightforward notion "needs" and by implication problematising its consequences for student "support".

In the second section I seek to illustrate how the conventional notion of student needs and student support draws attention away from rather than towards their and our 'real' needs.

In the third section I outline the implications of this account for universities in such a way as to provide a reminder of a very different way of contextualising and subsequently conceptualising supporting students in Open and Distance Learning.

Introduction

This paper is intended to be no more than the beginnings of an effort to generate discussion at the conference around a range of themes that can all too often be forgotten at conferences of this kind. Themes that in my view we can ill afford to forget.

I am hoping, as I am sure are others in relation to their own contributions, that in the period between the paper's submission and the actual conference I will have made the space to explore some of the issues further and in this way to ensure that the discussion at the conference reaches a more scholarly and sophisticated level. Although, by the end of even this initial formulation of this set of issues, such a goal may well seem far more questionable than at the outset.

Bradshaw's typology of needs

Some decades ago I read an article by Jonathon Bradshaw (1977) entitled "The concept of social need" I believe that a brief introduction and outline of some of the matters he raised may help us to reflect upon the idea of student needs that informs debates about student support services.

Bradshaw (1977) presents a typology of needs in which he differentiates between 'felt need', 'expressed need', 'comparative need' and 'normative need' and, in addition, and by implication, he differentiates all of these from 'real need'.

I will say a little more about each of these categories in a moment but the general point I am seeking to bring to the fore is that a seemingly everyday concept such as is that of 'need' can very persuasively draw our attention towards seemingly obvious and significant matters that themselves can readily consume all of our energies and more. However, in doing so the notion draws our attention away from the complex and contested terrain it actually occupies.

I am suggesting that the complex and contested terrain may actually require attention in order that we can begin to deal effectively with the seemingly more obvious matters.

So let us look very quickly at each of his categories. In our discussion at the conference I anticipate that we can add depth to the argument by providing examples from the Open and Distance Education arena that will display the practical importance of this typology:

Felt need - according to Bradshaw "Here need is equated with want. When assessing need for a service, people are asked whether they feel they need it". (1977 p 33)

Expressed need - according to Bradshaw this "...is felt need turned into action... Expressed need is commonly used in the health services where waiting lists are taken as a measure of unmet need". (1977 p 34)

Comparative need - according to Bradshaw "By this definition, a measure of need is found by studying the characteristics of those in receipt of a service. If people with similar characteristics are not in receipt of the service, then they are in need." (1977 p 34)

Normative need - according to Bradshaw this is ".. what the expert or the professional, administrator or social scientist defines as a need in any situation". (1977 p 33)

Bradshaw's model in effect maps these four types of definitions of need onto each other and he then goes on to discuss in detail the various possibilities raised through from, at the one end, the situation where all four types of definition exist and overlap to, at the other, the situation where there is an absence of need on all definitions. He also considers the range of various intricate combinations in between. I cannot provide illustrations from DE and OL here but doubtless such examples could be provided by conference attendees.

However this still leaves a category Bradshaw refers to as 'real need.' Bradshaw (1977 p 36) suggests that once the policymaker is presented with this more sophisticated picture the policymaker must decide which configuration constitutes the 'real need'. This decision will, of course, be influenced by the value orientation of the policy maker.

It is crucial of course that we remember that, as Bradshaw points out (p 33), from an economist's point of view, in the market place these matters are resolved in a seemingly unproblematic way through the application of the notion of 'effective demand,' ie. demand is effective (things or services are needed) when people are prepared to pay for them. The point is however, that for a whole range of reasons, it may be inappropriate to link student support services to the ability to pay. That this critique may apply to the market more broadly is of course a totally different matter.

So enough on Bradshaw I would hope by now that it is clear that notions of need that underpin notions of support are grounded in a terrain that is complex and that is likely to be contested if brought to the surface.

Back to Musgrove

I am also reminded of another work that increasingly comes to the fore in my considerations of the issues confronting university education today and this is the piece by Musgrove in

1978 where he distinguishes between the bourgeois (domesticated) university and the aristocratic university. The relevance of this distinction to a debate about student support and by implication student needs cannot go unmentioned.

Musgrove argues that:

" The traditional model (the aristocratic model) was marked by apartness, even foreignness - foreign languages, even dead languages were at its centre. Domestication has meant the following: greater sensitivity to the needs and interests of local communities; the decline of languages from curricular pre-eminence; the arrival of integrated-hybrid degrees; and perhaps above all the spectacular rise of 'introverted subjects which feed upon the student's own absorbed self interest, psychology, sociology, modern social and local history, English literature after Jane Austen. The Great Tradition of English education has been about personal growth and development through access to other significant forms of thought and feeling: it has been about breaking the stranglehold of the present on the mind. Domestication intensifies it". (Musgrove, 1978, p 404)

What a shock Musgrove would get now if he saw the decline of these 'introverted subjects' in the face of the swing to commerce and vocationally oriented degrees. However, elsewhere he argues that "The domestic is frugal, protected, parsimonious - it is not wild, extravagant, untamed" (Musgrove, 1978, p 405) and, as we shall see, I suspect that this opposition still underpins the distinction between the work some academics want to do and the work they find themselves and those around them doing in what Duke refers to as the Service Station University (Duke 1992).

Now of course the dichotomy drawn by Musgrove between the aristocratic and the bourgeois university has plenty of limitations but it does at least remind us of a whole range of matters that may be worthy of our attention when we are considering what our universities are about and as I hope I show later that is not a matter we should be prepared to ignore.

A return to an earlier debate about 'dirty work'

In the period that Bradshaw was writing a number of sociologists were attending a set of issues surrounding what was referred to as 'dirty work' and in this section I want to draw upon that debate to bring to the fore two themes that are relevant to the conference.

In one part of that debate sociologists such as Everett Hughes considered how it was that ordinary people could engage in work that appeared to proceed with an extraordinary indifference to the implications of that work. I would contend that this is a major issue in the universities today.

A second aspect of the 'dirty work' debate related to the manner in which workers in one way or another treated work that either they or others did but that they saw as in some way dirty or beneath them. I would contend that this aspect of the debate about dirty work might help inform our considerations of the relationships between academics and general staff and our considerations of the orientation of such staff to different work tasks that these staff themselves engage in. By understanding such matters we may be better placed to improve the ways we support students.

So back to the 'indifference' issue. The classic illustration in this literature is the discussion as to how SS guards in the concentration camps could carry out atrocities whilst retaining a sense of self respect. I will not go into detail here but in my presentation at the conference I will be seeking to display how this aspect of the analysis of 'dirty work' can help us to grasp how myopic we can become as we are consumed by locally generated and locally focussed concerns. One brief quote from this analysis may help stimulate thought before we move on: "Within the SS, duty, obedience and work replaced consciousness of wrongdoing." (Woollacott, 1976, p 110) We live in an era of enormous potential for both global harm and good and yet increasingly our universities are drawn into agendas that provide no time to reflect and attend to such matters. In effect the global situation might be seen as analogous to one large concentration camp in which we, the privileged, somehow retain a form of sanity by differentiating ourselves from the overwhelming majority of the world's population. We need to remember that as the following suggests:

"The remarkable feature of the mass murder of the camps was that they were performed by people who in the ordinary course of events were 'decent citizens', who in normal circumstances would have been unlikely to commit a crime but whose sense of right and wrong had been obliterated by ideology (Buchheim 1968 p. 363 cited in Woollacott, 1976)

Or later:

"... I had been given an order and I had to carry it out. Whether this mass extermination of the Jews was necessary or not was something on which I could not allow myself to form an opinion, for I lacked the necessary breadth of view...." (Hoess 1961 p 161-2 cited in Woollacott 1976)

John Langmore, Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development in the UN Secretariat has recently written that:

"...After half a century of uneven but often rapid and widespread economic growth, the world is far richer than ever before in human history and has unprecedented technological capacity. ... Yet despite the resulting capacity to achieve security for all, half of human kind lives on less than \$4 a day, in or close to poverty, and so are certainly suffering from deprivation and insecurity of many kinds. A fifth of humankind live in severe poverty, which means not only inadequate income but also hunger and inadequate access to education, health care, shelter, personal safety or political influence. This and global information flows force on us what C. P. Snow called the 'ultimate obscenity', the rich sitting in comfort watching other people starve in colour television'. ...Inequality of income, wealth, assets and power between and within most countries is high and generally growing. One simple statistic is enough to illustrate this: the 20 per cent of people with the highest incomes receive 86 per cent of total global income." (Langmore, 2001, p 3)

What I am suggesting is that the consequence of this is that our efforts to support students are no more morally worthy than the efforts of those who provided training or emotional support

for those SS guards unless the goals our universities seek to achieve are morally worthy. This is why we have an obligation to keep those institutional goals in view.

The uncomfortable cynicism that increasingly pervades universities is itself illustrative of a quiet awareness that saying 'I was just doing my job' ultimately is not a particularly convincing argument for self or other. As we see with the current case of Milosovich seemingly heroic efforts one day can be redefined as the lowest of the low the next. An 'I was just doing my job' defence is not that likely to protect him and we shouldn't feel it will protect us.

Perhaps the second aspect of the debate about dirty work will be a bit less demanding to grapple with, however, here I will be attempting to uncover how the debate about dirty work can help us to find some of the conceptual tools we need to better understand the relationships between academics and general staff, and I don't think this will prove to be an insignificant issue.

Why is it that certain activities are perceived as more worthy than others? Perhaps one way to begin is to revisit a distinction I have raised elsewhere between a productivity consciousness and an erotic consciousness or an aesthetic consciousness (Campion, 2001). Many academics from both more traditional backgrounds and more radical orientations perceive their/our work to be massively inhibited, disoriented and corrupted by a dominant focus upon its contribution to the society's or the university's productivity. For such academics seeking or being awarded funds for such so called 'relevant' research is tantamount to selling out on a more morally worthy enterprise. Not surprisingly they/we would view such work as analogous to dirty work.

This seemingly rarified view of scholarly work, which is hinted at in the piece from Musgrove above, is more akin to the types of free pursuits that can be engaged in at one's leisure, and consequently other university employees, ie. administrators and general staff may well use an evaluative framework that attributes worth in an exactly opposite fashion for they may well see the absence of productivity as akin to idleness, that is as decadent.

That version of academic work is reflected in the following account of the poet's role:

Americans do things and go places. The poet does things and goes places too, only he does unusual things and goes to uncharted places. This in itself may make him an object of suspicion. But he is guilty of a worse crime and one which sets his role more incontrovertibly against the American temper: his efforts have no obvious utility. In this respect he is more deviant than the gangster, whose role at least has an objective utility for himself in that it may make him rich before it makes him dead. (Wilson 1964 p.17 cited in Woollacott, 1976)

Those who evaluate the universities' work from the outside are also increasingly likely see an absence of productivity as akin to idleness, as decadent, but what if it was to turn out that the commitment to productivity and its associate consumption was where decadence lay? Are we supporting students when we only supply them with the skills and knowledges that will fit them for such an environment? Perhaps such a realisation could open up more space for the scholarship and sophistication mentioned at the outset?

Conclusion

Of course this paper is sketchy and extraordinarily limited, but perhaps through a brief consideration of it conference attendees will be encouraged to consider at least adding an additional dot point to the list that has been provided. The paper is intended to provide a reminder of a very different way of contextualising and subsequently conceptualising supporting students in Open and Distance Learning. We work and study in contradictory and confused environments but it is better that we remember rather than forget this however discomfiting that might be. As I have argued in my recent Open Learning paper it is time we had a new Great debate about Education hopefully this conference paper and more importantly the presentation will add a bit more weight to that argument.

References

- Bradshaw, J. (1977) 'The concept of social need', in M. Fitzgerald, P Halmos, J. Muncie and D. Zeldin (eds) *Welfare in Action*, London, Routledge, 33 - 36.
- Buchheim, H. (1968) '*The SS - instrument of domination*' in H. Krausnick et al (1968) pp 303 - 396.
- Campion, M. (2001) 'The new Great Debate' *Open Learning*, 16 (1): 69 - 83.
- Duke, C. (1992) *The Learning University: towards a new paradigm*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Hoess, R. (1961) *Commandant of Auschwitz*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon, London, Pan Books.
- Hughes .E. C. (1958) *Men and their Work*, Free Press, New York, cited in *Occupational Categories and Cultures 1*, (1978) D351 6-8 People and Work: a third level course, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Krausnick, H. Buchheim, H. Brosat, M. and Jacobsen, H. A. (1968) *Anatomy of the SS State*, London, Collins.
- Langmore, J. *Aspects of the Governance of Globalisation*, Keith Roby Memorial lecture, June 2001, Murdoch University, Perth Western Australia.
- Occupational Categories and Cultures 1*, (1978) D351 6-8 People and Work: a third level course, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Musgrove, F. (1978) 'The Domesticated University', *the New Universities Quarterly*, 32(4), 402 - 412.
- Wilson, R. N. (1964) 'The poet in American Society', in Wilson R.N. (ed) *The Arts in Society*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall Inc, PP 1- 34.
- Woollocott, J. Deviant and Dirty Work in *Occupational Categories and Cultures 1*, (1978) D351 6-8 People and Work: a third level course, Milton Keynes, Open University Press. P 93 - 128.

Supporting the masses?: Learner perceptions of a South African ODL programme.

N.A. Corry and A.D. Lelliott

School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3, Wits, 2050, South Africa.

Abstract

This paper describes and discusses how learners have been supported in a mixed-mode teacher development programme in South Africa. In our context, the learners are mature educators who have a minimum of four years of training, usually from a college of education. The majority of these colleges were set up by the former apartheid government, and produced a widely disparate quality of education. The learners work in rural or urban-township environments, and have minimal or no access to electronically mediated learning, hence the programme relies mainly on text-based materials.

An analysis and discussion of learner responses to a survey conducted at the completion of the programme incorporates reference to relevant literature. The survey focuses on student perceptions of how they were supported in the following ways: working with course materials in their own contexts, communication with the university, participating in study groups, and assistance in setting up their own self-study programmes.

The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for how learner support can be improved in such a programme.

Introduction

In South Africa, the Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree has traditionally been a one-year full-time or two-year part-time course followed by educators who wish to enhance their academic and professional knowledge and expertise. In 1996, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, introduced a Further Diploma in Education (FDE), which is a professional development programme for teachers in possession of a three-year teaching diploma (the basic qualification for teaching). The FDE programme is offered on a part-time semi-distance basis, and enables primary and secondary teachers to further develop their educational and content knowledge in the areas of Mathematics, Science or English Language Teaching. As a result of changes in admission policy in line with government guidelines, in 1999 the University allowed entry to its BEd programme to candidates with either a four-year diploma or a three-year diploma plus FDE. Many applicants came from the University's FDE diplomates, who requested that the BEd programme be adapted from a face-to-face programme to a semi-distance mode like that of the FDE. As a result, a flexible-learning Bachelor of Education (Flexi-BEd) was developed to suit students who live at a distance from Johannesburg.

The Flexi-BEd is taught over two years, and consists of eight modules and a small scale research project. The programme uses a composite of learning materials and contact sessions in the delivery of the BEd course in a flexible learning mode. During each year three major contact sessions that coincide with school holidays are a compulsory component of the programme. These sessions are designed to evaluate student progress through discussion of

concepts and ideas already encountered by students, and to prepare students through lectures and tutorials for the next section of the course. The study materials comprise a course book with activities and a reader containing key readings for the module. The goals of the programme have the three-fold purpose of assisting students to:

- strengthen their academic reading and writing competences
- develop conceptual and theoretical frameworks that will create understanding and capacity to intervene in practice
- engage constructively and critically with curriculum innovations.

The materials are thus written with this purpose in mind and the tutorials at contact sessions are a forum in which students can discuss, critique and apply concepts and theories they encounter in the study materials.

The programme provides a variety of support mechanisms to assist the students in their studies. These include face-to-face tutorials and individual counselling during the residential contact sessions, interactive course materials which assist the students in understanding course content, detailed feedback on assignments; telephonic contact with the university whereby students can engage with tutors and administrative staff in order to solve academic or other difficulties, and assistance in the formation of study groups.

This paper presents an analysis of a sample of student responses to a questionnaire completed by the first cohort of Flexi-BEd students (Refer Appendix A). The survey elicited responses to the following broad questions:

- reasons why the students chose this course;
- methods of study and students' study environment;
- communication with the university including access to new technologies;
- impact of the programme on students' professional practice.

Our analysis of the student survey addresses each of these four areas.

Profile of Students

The majority of students enrolled in the programme are from either the Gauteng province, in which Wits University is situated, or from the Northern Province, some three to four travelling hours from Wits University. Many of those from the Northern Province work in a rural or semi-rural situation in resource-poor environments similar to that of KwaZulu-Natal students described by Glennie (1996:25), that is, environments having inadequate education provision, cramped housing situations and limited public transportation. Of the group 56% were male and 44% were female, and 46 % had entered the programme via the Wits FDE route.

The responders to the questionnaire comprised a moderately representative sample of the first student cohort in terms of (i) gender – 53% male, 47% female and (ii) employment – 42% were involved in primary education, 47% in secondary, 6% in tertiary and the rest worked for non-governmental organisations. The majority came from the Northern Province (64%), 17% from Gauteng and 19% were from three other provinces. In addition, the majority were Wits FDE graduates (69%).

Analysis of Questionnaire

In total 36 students completed the questionnaire, although not all of them completed all questions. Where relevant, this paper will indicate the percentage responses for the different sections.

Reasons why the students chose this course

When asked why they chose to study the B Ed through a mixed mode course delivery programme, over 90% of students stated that this method suited their work and social situation. One student commented that it was the only B Ed programme they had found that offered the particular topic in which they were interested. A big factor in choice of study mode was the financial benefit derived from earning a salary while studying and being able to hold onto employment when many others were unemployed. Gordon (2001) reports a similar finding to this in a report on a teacher-upgrading project in a rural area in South Africa. Over 80% said that studying through this method allowed them access to study, which they would not normally have.

Student study methods and study environment

Over 80% of students reported that they studied at home, while less than 20% stated that they used the school premises for study. Evenings and weekends were the most popular times for studying, with fewer than 12% using the mornings or afternoons. 40% of the respondents stated that they spent 4 to 9 hours studying each week, while a further 40% reported spending 10 to 15 hours. The remaining 20% of students claimed that they spent in excess of 15 hours.

Over 80% of students had electricity in their place of study, but a small percentage reported that a lack of electricity made studying difficult. 60% of respondents had a private room or space in which to study, while only 46% had regular, undisturbed study times.

Family and work pressures were cited as the most common impediments to study. These would probably translate into a 'lack of time', which was also referred to in various ways as a difficulty by several respondents. Isolation or lack of a study partner was specified by a small number of participants. Other factors which made study difficult included family problems, noisy neighbours and a lack of understanding of assignment questions.

The BEd programme made considerable attempts in the course materials and residential session to assist students to organise their own time effectively for study. When asked what helped them most, the commonest responses were assistance from their spouse and members of their study groups, and the time suggestions in the course materials. Students appreciated the need for effective personal discipline and time management, but three students stated that nothing assisted them to manage their time effectively.

From the inception of the Further Diploma in Education programme, the course organisers have encouraged the students to find study partners and to form study groups with other students enrolled on the programme. This has continued in the flexi-BEd, and, given the higher academic demands of this programme, may even be more important than in the FDE.

The importance of study groups or 'peer group learning' has been given prominence by various authors, for example Holt (1994), who has carried out a detailed study of study groups within a distance learning MBA programme. Some of the benefits identified by him

are improved students' learning and formal performance, increased student productivity, benchmarking of attainment and an increase in general motivation and support.

Nearly 60% of the flexi-B Ed respondents stated that they are a member of a study cluster, and the modal number for such a group is 2 or 3 persons (65% of respondents form groups of this size). However, as many as 30% of the students who are members of a study cluster work in groups of 6 or more persons. There is a relatively large contingent of students from the Northern Province (23 out of 36 respondents), and it appears that some of these students have formed one large cluster of approximately twelve.

The study clusters usually meet at the students' homes, school, local library or church, and vary in frequency of contact from several times a week to every three months. Most groups appear to meet every two to three weeks, though some groups also contact each other on a regular basis by phone when necessary. Most study group meetings last 2 to 3 hours, but the large group in the Northern Province referred to above, meets for the whole weekend on occasions, with individual members attending for part of the time. The purpose of such meetings is to discuss aspects of the course materials, often with a focus on assignments. The students regard the benefits as including understanding ideas as a result of discussion, and the sharing of ideas. One of the theories covered in the BEd programme is constructivism, with the 'social construction of knowledge' used as an example of one of the ways in which learners learn. The students who form study clusters appear to appreciate that their own learning is enhanced in this manner, in that they refer to peer discussion as a useful tool for learning. In a study of a similar cohort of students elsewhere in South Africa, Bertram (2000) found that students perceived study group discussion to be valuable for learning.

The students who have not joined study clusters cite long distance from other members enrolled on the programme as being the main reason why they have not formed a study group. Logistical transport difficulties and financial constraints also contribute to a lack of peer group learning among a minority of students. Holt (1994) and Tait (1996) suggest that in the case of geographically isolated students, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) may assist in enabling interaction, and it is to this aspect of the survey that we now turn.

Communication with the University

Contact with the university for a student studying through a flexible learning programme is what sets that student apart from those studying through correspondence at home. From the outset of the Flexi-BEd, the programme organisers made a decision *not* to include the use of ICTs as a core component of the courses. This decision was based on an assumption that, from our experience with students enrolled on the FDE programme, few had access to computers or the Internet. It was suggested that any requirement for teachers to interact with each other or with the University by (for example) email, would heighten the disparities between the more- and less-resourced students. There was evidence from research carried out on the FDE programme (Adler et. al. 1998) that issues of differential resource provision between the rural and urban-based teachers were a source of potential friction.

In the survey, 9 teachers (25% of respondents) reported that they have access to a computer that they can use in their studies. The majority of these have access at home or at school, and 6 of the 9 have email and Internet access. While this is an encouraging figure when compared to the assumption described above, it does reflect that only 17% of students would be able to interact with each other or the University using email or a web-based programme.

Unsurprisingly, 21 teachers (over 90% of respondents of this part of the survey) would favour having email and web-based learning integrated into the programme, the main reasons cited being easier access to information, that it is important to be computer literate, and that we live in a technological world. Lelliott et. al. (2000) have argued that the promotion of ICTs in contexts of very limited resource provision should not be the highest priority for policy makers. However, as a pilot study, given the very low infrastructural base for ICTs available to the majority of teachers, it could be worthwhile for the programme organisers to investigate the possible use of study centres, Internet cafés and similar sites through which technology-enhanced learning might be achieved.

Student perceptions of the support offered through communication with Wits were canvassed in terms of contact with students during sessions at the university and when they were studying in their home environment. Students were asked what worked well for them. The majority (78%) reported that tutorial help through telephonic contact worked best for them, followed closely by the tutorial help received in the form of feedback on return of written assignments (75%). The use of the telephone as a means of contact for students who are isolated has been investigated by Maher and Rewt (2001). However, even though telephone contact is regarded by students as worthwhile it is, as reported by Gordon, costly to maintain for students in rural areas, both in terms of time and money (2001:12). Less than 40% of respondents stated that they used fax in communication with the university and only one student used email.

Meeting with staff was important for 67% of respondents. Many students emphasized in individual comments that they found the accessibility of staff and their interest in student progress, coupled with the emotional support offered to be of most help. Conversely when asked what did not work well for them some students reported that tutors were not always accessible and did not always give sufficient feedback on assignments

Over one third of students indicated that they made use of library services during contact sessions. Less than 15% of students also reported benefit from other types of support set up for them during contact sessions, such as a counselling service, and a study skills programme. Individual criticisms from students included a slow postal service, failure to receive feedback in

time for examination work, difficulty in engaging with a particular module, time spent traveling to the institution and isolation from other students in their home context.

Impact of the programme on students' professional practice

Students were asked to comment on the impact of the course on their educational practice. As it is one of the goals of the programme to assist students to make some intervention in their practice there was an expectation of some positive response from students. In an evaluation dependant on student responses without any empirical evidence, the personal analysis of students is taken on trust. We can only report what students claim about any significant change.

In all the responses to the questionnaire students recorded that the B Ed programme had had a significant impact on their professional practice. This was perceived by students to occur in two ways:

- It assisted them to relate theory to practice.
- It gave them a new confidence to take on a more prominent role in their educational context

Several students indicated a direct relation between study and classroom practice, and some gave details of changes to teaching approaches in their specific subject. The majority claimed a greater competence in developing new strategies and approaches to teaching and learning and one student alleged there had been a radical change to his/her classroom approach. In terms of cross-curricular application, at least three students said that they were better able to integrate their subject area with other subject areas. In total, 64% of responses were directed to how the course enabled students to relate theories encountered in the programme to their professional practice.

The importance of the relationship between education and practice for professional growth has been emphasised by Leach, who maintains that learning in the broad sense of being a lifelong exercise should have central place in learner support (1996:104). In the evidence supplied from the survey, the way in which the programme enhanced the personal development of students accounted for 36% of the responses. The majority spoke of a new confidence to interact with colleagues not only within their own specialisation, but also across the curriculum. They reported an improved ability to recognise and resolve issues and problems within the school community, and the majority attributed this to leadership and management skills acquired through their academic study over the two years of the programme. The way in which the programme informed them of new issues in curriculum empowered them to take a leading role in curriculum development in their context. Three students attributed their promotion in their school directly to their BEd studies.

Perhaps the following response from a student sums up student perception of the impact of the programme on their practice:

I started to see education and my career in a new way.

Student perception about what specifically initiated change in their professional practice concerned, firstly, the course materials. Over 70% of the responses given indicated that students felt change was due to the course materials. Reasons given were, firstly, the relevance of modules to their context and, secondly, that the way in which the modules had been written encouraged reflection and application. It has already been noted that the goals of the programme informed the writing of BEd modules by staff who then also tutored students during face-to-face sessions. It has been questioned, for example Tait (1996), whether mass-produced and pre-packaged course materials can support individual learners in flexible learning programmes. Others, for example, Fage and Mayes (1996) and Mays (2000) have argued that course materials are a form of support. The programme organisers, when setting up the course in 1999 and when compiling the survey questions, did so with the conviction that the course materials would be a support to students. For example, many of the activities included in the materials require students to undertake specific tasks in their classrooms and to participate in self-reflective exercises.

In the survey, several students suggested specific modules had been a catalyst for change. They felt that as they studied a particular module it seemed to directly challenge them in their particular discipline. This is borne out by students' response to the question in which they

were asked to give an evaluation of the materials of particular modules. In the responses given by students in this particular question it was clear that they found the materials to be helpful. Over 80% of the responses indicated that the materials provided students with a good introduction to topics, were user-friendly in terms of overall presentation, assisted them to understand new concepts and ideas, and challenged them to think more critically. Less than 10% of responses were critical of the materials. Though one module was considered by some students to be 'too theoretical', the same students nevertheless felt that it also challenged them to think critically and helped them understand new concepts. Another criticism concerned the number of activities set for students. Generally it was felt that, with the exception of two, each module had too many activities set for students. Students were divided in opinion regarding the style of writing of two particular modules, but felt that these modules nevertheless assisted them to progress in understanding concepts and new ideas and in thinking more critically about issues.

In response to being asked what they gained most from the course materials, the majority reported that the design of materials assisted them to think and read more critically. Over 60% made a direct link between understanding gained through using course materials and improvement in educational practice. Many students stated that they had acquired new skills – academic, leadership and communication – through engagement with the course materials.

A second reason given by students for changes in their practice was the interaction with academic staff through telephonic contact and during contact sessions. This accounted for 30% of student perception of what started the change. 'Lecturers who are willing to assist', 'the approach of lecturers', 'the influence of lecturers' and 'contact with lecturers during contact sessions' are examples of the comments given by students. One student felt that s/he could not be certain what instigated change but stated "I found myself changing as I went through the course and that was demonstrated in practice".

The value and importance of personalised communication in flexible learning programmes through both horizontal and vertical relationships, has been discussed by Tait (1996) and by Leach (1996). Tait points out the dangers of losing the personalised community face of a programme in favour of a more managerial approach, which minimises interaction between learner and tutor (1996:66-67). Leach concludes in her discussion that learner support is more of a 'process' that enhances learning than a 'provision to be managed' (1996:123). Much of what is being debated about the personal nature of learner support is owed to Holmberg (1981) who developed the notion of 'guided didactic conversation' as an approach to distance education. He argues that students need to be directed through their study by good 'conversations' or interactions with tutors that includes emotional and academic support, and through accessible and supportive course materials.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind that this was a qualitative survey, based on student impressions of the Flexi BEd programme, a number of conclusions that may be relevant to courses in similar contexts can nevertheless be drawn:

Firstly, a mixed-mode flexible learning course of this type clearly suits both rural and urban teachers in South Africa, given that they can develop their professional competence while still earning a salary.

Secondly, studying as part of a formal or informal study cluster appears to have a significant positive effect on learning. ODL programmes offered in circumstances such as those of South Africa should vigorously promote the formation of study clusters.

Thirdly, even in a technologically resource-poor environment, there is great interest in the use of Information and Communications Technology on the part of the learners. Given that the use of ICTs is likely to increase in the near future, any programme should consider making use of such technology where feasible.

Fourthly, students' academic and professional growth appears to derive most benefit from a more personalised interaction with staff at face-to-face sessions and through the reflective style of course materials. Therefore a purely managerial approach to setting up ODL programmes should be resisted.

Fifthly, it is apparent that students benefit from tutorial help via telephone and written feedback on assignments. It is imperative for programmes in South Africa to ensure that there is a reasonable turn-around time in marking students' work, and that ways be found to circumvent delays through postal problems in rural areas, etc. More comprehensive ways of conducting telephone tutorials should also be investigated.

References

- Adler, J., Lelliott, T., Reed, Y., Bapoo, A., Brodie, K., Dikgomo, P., Nyabanyaba, T., Roman, A., Setati, M., Slonimsky, L., Davis, H. and De Wet, H 1998. *Mixed-mode FDE's and their effects: a study of the classroom practices of primary and secondary mathematics, science and English language teachers enrolled in the Wits Further Diplomas in Education Programme*. Interim Report, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.
- Bertram, C 2000. A mixed mode distance education model for teacher education: Rationale, student experiences and quality. Paper presented at the 2nd NADEOSA conference, Pretoria, South Africa.
- Fage, J and Mayes, R 1996. Monitoring learners' progress, in Mills & Tait 1996: 206-221.
- Glennie, J 1996. Towards learner-centred distance education in the changing South African context, in Mills & Tait 1996: 19-33.
- Gordon, A 2001. SAIDE's rural education research project: The Jozini case study. *Open Learning through Distance Education*, vol. 7 no. 1, 10-12.
- Holmberg, B 1981. *Status and trends of distance education*. New York: Nichols.
- Holt, D 1994. Peer Group Learning in Open and Distance Education. *Teaching and Learning in Open and Distance Education 2: Study Guide Section 2*. University of South Australia.
- Leach, J 1996. Learning in practice: Support for professional development, in Mills, R & Tait 1996: 101-126
- Lelliott, A.D., Pendlebury, S. and Enslin, P. A. 2000. Lelliott, A., Pendlebury, S. and Enslin. 2000. Promises of access and inclusion: Online Education in Africa. *J. Philos. Education* 34 1 pp 41-52.
- Maher, P and Rewt, P 2001. Using the telephone to support isolated learners. Paper presented at the 20th World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, Dusseldorf, Germany.
- Mays, T 2000. Learner support: a South African programme perspective. Paper presented at the 2nd NADEOSA conference, Pretoria, South Africa.

Mills, R & Tait, A (eds) 1996. *Supporting learners in open and distance learning*. London: Pitman.

Tait, A 1996. Conversation and community: Student support in open and distance learning, in Mills & Tait 1996: 59-72.

APPENDIX A

**Flexi-B Ed Programme 2000
Student Questionnaire Year Two**

Please complete the following questionnaire with openness and frankness. This will assist us in evaluating our programme.

1. *Studying at a Distance*

Why did you choose to study a course offered in a semi-distance mode of delivery?

Suited my work and social situation
I prefer to study this way

Now that you are nearing completion of the two-year Flexi-B Ed course, what is your general opinion about studying through a semi-distance mode of course delivery? You may tick as many as appropriate.

An opportunity to relate theory to practice
A way of bringing change in my context
A chance to meet people from different parts of South Africa
I can choose my times of study
Gives access to study which I would not normally have

Other comments:

2. **Course materials**

Choose four modules/ topics that you studied over the two years and show which of the following statements apply to the course materials of a particular module/ topic.. You may tick as many as appropriate.

Module/ Topic Name	Module/ Topic Name
Gave a good introduction to the topic	Gave a good introduction to the topic
Layout made it easy to use	Layout made it easy to use
Was clearly written	Was clearly written
Written in a complicated style	Written in a complicated style
Helped you understand new concepts	Helped you understand new concepts
Did not give enough input on issues	Did not give enough input on issues
Was too theoretical	Was too theoretical
Challenged you to think through issues	Challenged you to think through issues
Too many activities	Too many activities
Not enough activities	Not enough activities

Module/ Topic Name	Module/ Topic Name
Gave a good introduction to the topic	Gave a good introduction to the topic
Layout made it easy to use	Layout made it easy to use
Was clearly written	Was clearly written
Written in a complicated style	Written in a complicated style
Helped you understand new concepts	Helped you understand new concepts
Did not give enough input on issues	Did not give enough input on issues
Was too theoretical	Was too theoretical
Challenged you to think through issues	Challenged you to think through issues
Too many activities	Too many activities
Not enough activities	Not enough activities

What did you gain most from using the materials of the above modules/ topics?

3. **Study conditions.**

Answer the following questions about the conditions under which you studied:

Where did you do most of your studying (e.g., school, home etc)?

When did you do your studying (e.g., morning, evening, weekends)/

Is there electricity in the place where you study? Y/N

Do you have a private room/ space in which you study? Y/N

Do you have regular undisturbed study times? Y/N

How much time each week did you allot to your studies? _____ hours

What makes study in your situation most difficult?

What assists you in the organising of your times of study in your situation?

4. Study Clusters

Are you a member of a study cluster? Y/N
What is the size of your cluster (including yourself)? _____ members
Where do you meet as a cluster? _____
How often do you meet? _____
How often do you contact each other by other means? _____
How long are your meeting times? _____ hours
What is the main focus of your meetings? _____

What are the benefits to you personally of belonging to the cluster?

If you are not a member of a cluster state the reason.

5. Contact with Wits

What worked well in terms of your contact with Wits? Tick as many of the following statements as appropriate:

Telephone	<input type="checkbox"/>	Email	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fax	<input type="checkbox"/>	Feedback on assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting with staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	Library services	<input type="checkbox"/>
Response to query: Admin	<input type="checkbox"/>	Counselling services	<input type="checkbox"/>
Academic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Study skills training	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pre-examination support	<input type="checkbox"/>	Academic advising	<input type="checkbox"/>

Any other comments:

Comment on what did not work well for you?

6. Use of Information and Communication Technology

Do you have any access to a computer that you can use in your studies? Y/N
If you answered YES, indicate where the computer is situated: (eg home, school, friend, work)

Does this computer: have Email Y/N
have access to the internet Y/N
Would you favour having computer-based learning, including E-Mail and Internet integrated into the course? Y/N
Give reasons for your answer

7. The B Ed Programme

In what ways has the programme impacted on your professional practice? Describe any change that has occurred:

What initiated the change?

What were some of the effects of your change on your work situation?

What would you like to have been included in the course?

Anything else you want to say about the Flexi-B Ed programme:

Thank you for your assistance.
Norma Corry
Please hand in before you leave

Helping students to manage study needs and develop generic skills through web-based learning resources

Marilyn Dorman
Distance Education Centre
The University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba, QLD Australia 4350
Tel. +61 (07) 46 31 2878
Fax. +61 (07) 46 31 2868
Email. dorman@usq.edu.au

Lorelle Burton
Faculty of Sciences (Psychology)
The University of Southern Queensland
Toowoomba, QLD Australia 4350
Tel. +61 (07) 46 31 2953
Fax. +61 (07) 46 31 2721
Email: burtonl@usq.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, students and staff at tertiary institutions are called upon to respond to paradigm shifts which impact upon their response to, and management of their environment. Both groups face increasing expectations that they will have access to a range of computer-based technologies, and that they will have medium to high levels of proficiency in using them. Further, students are encouraged – often expected – to be self-directed in their approach to their studies, and self-managers of their learning.

At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) these expectations exist, but they are acknowledged through a staged integration of technologies in course development and design, through a network of support staff, and through conscious attempts to consider generic skills development, as well as specific requirements for the professional environments in which students are, or aim to be employed.

This paper explains the development and application of Web-based interactive exercises to help USQ psychology students become more independent and accurate in academic referencing, specifically, the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style. This is a requirement for their course, as well as for their professional writing. The *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* cover the most frequently used referencing elements, and are designed so that students can access the information they need when they need it; they can then practise the exercises as often as they wish, and receive confirmation of accuracy. Thus students may be confident that their referencing is correct when they submit their assignments, and if there are particular queries, the lecturer/tutor is able to provide individual attention. Student responses to the exercises have been very positive, and these will be discussed in the paper.

CONTEXT

New technologies are opening up a range of new opportunities and challenges for educators. One of the most important is the ability to deliver tertiary education courses via a variety of online platforms. In many ways, these technologies are liberating the education sector. Previous boundaries of time, location and distance are gradually being overcome. But online delivery of courses is only one benefit of the online revolution; another is the vast array of new tools and techniques that it provides for educators to use in their everyday activities. The challenge is both to adjust to online delivery and to incorporate new technologies into the more 'traditional' modes of study. Students in today's world approach the task of learning in a different way - they expect the university courses they study to do the same. Educators and tertiary institutions must embrace this brave new world of teaching or be left behind.

Staff from the Faculty of Sciences and the Distance Education Centre at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) have taken up these challenges by developing a Web-based, self-paced interactive learning resource for students – the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises*. Not only have the exercises proved a success for psychology students, but also, they can be adapted to suit a range of referencing styles for a range of disciplines.

This project evolved in response to a need for USQ psychology students to learn how to use American Psychological Association (APA) referencing and to apply it to their assignments. The APA format is the standard referencing style used in the study of psychology worldwide. Although the *APA Publication Manual* was set as a reference text for students, and they were provided with other print-based practice resources, students still presented assignments with inaccurate referencing. This was particularly true for the many students who were entering university studies for the first time and were unfamiliar with the protocols and rigour of writing in the academic world. Not only were students losing marks for incorrect referencing, but also, staff were spending long periods correcting the errors and providing feedback. For example, in this year alone more than 1000 students will be submitting a total of 3000 assignments in two, level-one units (Foundation Psychology and Social Processes of Behaviour). Even if staff spent only five minutes per student correcting referencing, this would amount to a significant and unnecessary extra workload.

The USQ team turned to new technologies to meet this challenge. The decision to develop web-based practice exercises was taken to provide students with a self-paced and interactive resource that would enable them to manage their own learning and have it take place in their own time. This would allow staff to devote time to providing feedback on other critical issues, or to further unit development. It was also believed that if the model were accepted by psychology students, it might also be of use to other university students and staff having to learn and/or teach referencing styles.

It is not uncommon to note in university Mission statements or lists of graduate attributes, statements to the effect that graduates should: be computer literate; be capable of problem solving; show competence and emerging expertise in their chosen discipline/s; be capable of independent learning, ethical behaviour, etcetera. (See Yetton et al. 1997) Implicit in learning academic referencing is the expectation that students might also be encouraged to acknowledge intellectual property, and to be dissuaded from plagiarism. (No attempt has yet been made to test for changes in affective behaviour in students using the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises*.)

Daniel (1994, p. 11) observes that 'The central goal of universities is to train people in the academic mode of thinking.' Consistent with this is the following policy statement from the USQ Mission statement: 'The principal function of the University is to provide the best possible environment wherein students are encouraged to develop the knowledge and skills needed to contribute professionally in the broader community'. Therefore, it was important that the referencing support resources would allow students to develop skills through practice and feedback, not simply to use a program which did the task for them.

The first step was to carry out preliminary research to determine if a suitable practice resource already existed. This research revealed a number of online reference resources. However, none appeared to offer the opportunity for students to develop their referencing skills in a self-paced, self-managed interactive environment, supported by both direct access to the unit leader and access to other complementary reference sites. The USQ team wished to develop a resource which provided practice examples of the most common referencing examples students were likely to encounter and to build on those skills as they progressed through the site. In addition, students were to be alerted to less standard references, and encouraged to develop research skills through the links provided.

Approximately two-thirds of USQ students study by distance mode, so it was also vital that the referencing support should be: based on accessible technologies; user-friendly; and appealing to the diverse student population. Differences in age, gender, and learning style preferences were also considered. Throughout the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* site, help has been provided in the form of general format templates, hints, links to help and user support sites, plus email links to academic, design, and technology support staff. In addition, an online evaluation questionnaire has been included to encourage continuous feedback to the team.

Fraser and Deane (1998, p. 66) in their investigation of effective open learning strategies, recorded that students preferred methodology which was different from the normal delivery. They also noted that '...particularly if it [methodology] is fun or interesting, it is helpful to the learning process'. This appears to be substantiated by comments from the first group of psychology students to trial the interactive exercises. Typical comments were:

'A fun way to learn APA referencing.'

'Helpful to have interactive exercises that are fun rather than having to always rely on the APA Manual.'

Rowntree (1991, p. 38) offers a list of learner-oriented issues to consider in planning self-instructional materials. Among the list he includes reference to learning activities 'that learners must, or justifiably could, engage in'; recalling where people have previously had learning difficulties; considering past performance in the same area; and drawing on 'expert' performance to construct the learning environment. These issues have been taken into account in designing the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises*. Learner preferences have also been considered in design features such as navigation buttons and menus which allow students to move freely between levels, and to attempt exercises as many times as they wish. Graphics are simple and uncluttered to minimise download time, and a cartoon character animation has been included to add a lighter touch to the 'Help' function. Collectively, these features have been chosen to encourage students to use the resource as often as they need to.

Melton (1997, p. 23) notes the importance of personal motivation in the development of competences. Setting a standard [e.g. the requirement to use APA referencing] is not enough to ensure it is accomplished. Therefore, the team wished to make the site as user-friendly as possible, and to encourage students to value it as a learning aid. While the mark allocated for correct referencing style in assignments is typically small, by confirming that their referencing is correct before submitting assignments, students are assured of at least that percentage of their mark before submitting assessment tasks. They can then concentrate more fully on the main learning activity.

It was also hypothesised that in addition to developing confidence in their referencing skills, by engaging in the online referencing activities students would also be developing their technology skills. That is, they would be practising site navigation, downloading software, basic wordprocessing, emailing, electronic feedback and internet searches at various stages of their APA practice activities. All of these skills are considered useful in the current education context, as well as for their future professional development.

In addition, students may use either print resources or Internet reference material to check points on referencing style, according to their preference. One of the links provided is to the USQ library site which includes complementary Web-based internet-literacy resources, including general guidelines for the main academic conventions. Ottewill and Hudson (1997) emphasise the need for greater collaboration between teaching staff and information specialists to help meet the information-gathering needs of students. In this project, we have attempted to complement existing resources rather than to replace them, acknowledging the need for an integrated approach which allows students maximum choice plus support when required.

DEVELOPMENT

The development team for the project consisted of the Foundation Psychology unit leader, Dr Lorelle Burton, (Faculty of Sciences, USQ), the instructional designer, Marilyn Dorman, and two interactive multimedia developers Lee Sinclair and Tom Cotton, all from the Distance Education Centre, USQ. Foundation Psychology is available to students in day, external, and online modes, with electronic discussion groups available to all students for student-to-student and student-to-lecturer contact. Some students take psychology units as their degree major, while others study psychology units as electives. The latter group may thus use APA referencing for some units, but another referencing convention for **their** major study area. Thus the site had to be comprehensive and appealing enough for a diverse range of users, including (possibly) staff using it to check referencing for research papers.

To make the project as cost-effective and time efficient as possible, it was decided to use existing COOLTools (Creative Opportunities for Online Learning) developed within USQ's Distance Education Centre. The main COOLTool was a drag-and-drop tool based on Macromedia Shockwave.

The development team adapted the tool so that it allowed students to select the most appropriate elements for a reference entry. Choices offered to them were based on the most common errors made by students, and compiled by the unit leader as distractors to encourage students to be more discriminating in their construction of reference entries.

Instructions for using the site were made as clear and succinct as possible, so that students could focus their time online on the referencing activities. Interactive tools were explained in text and graphics to accommodate different learning styles, but students could choose to bypass that section once they understood the options available to them. They were also provided with a complete contents list for the site if they preferred to gain an overview of all levels and to avoid the disorientation which sometimes occurs in websites.

Figure 1 is an illustration of the Drag-and-Drop tool, showing the fields in which students construct their reference, and the choices available to them.

Figure 1. Drag-and-Drop COOLTool

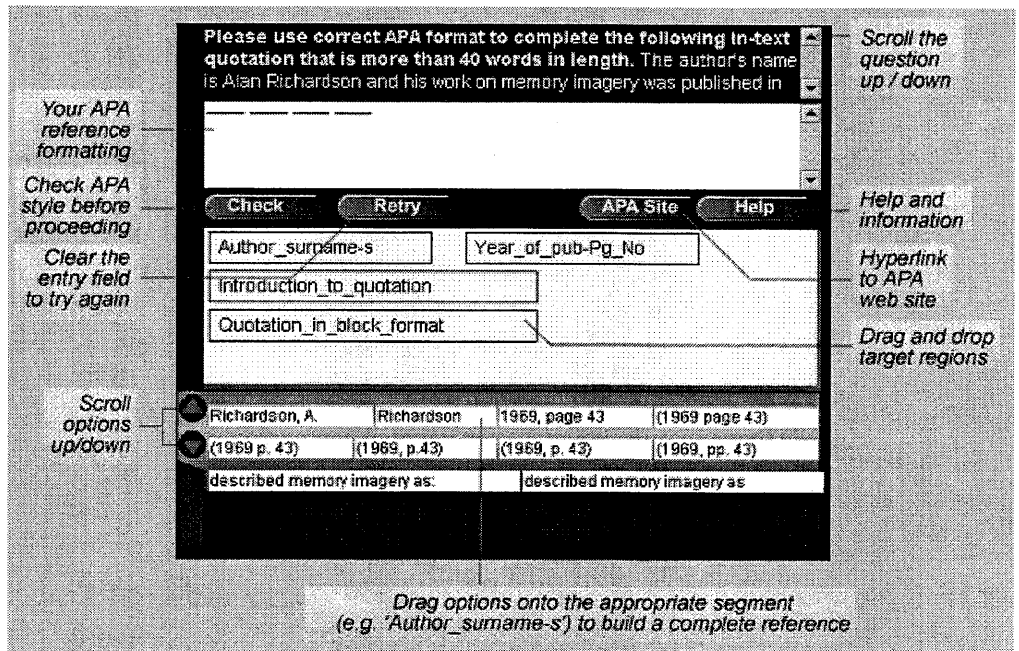


Figure 2. The Typist tool

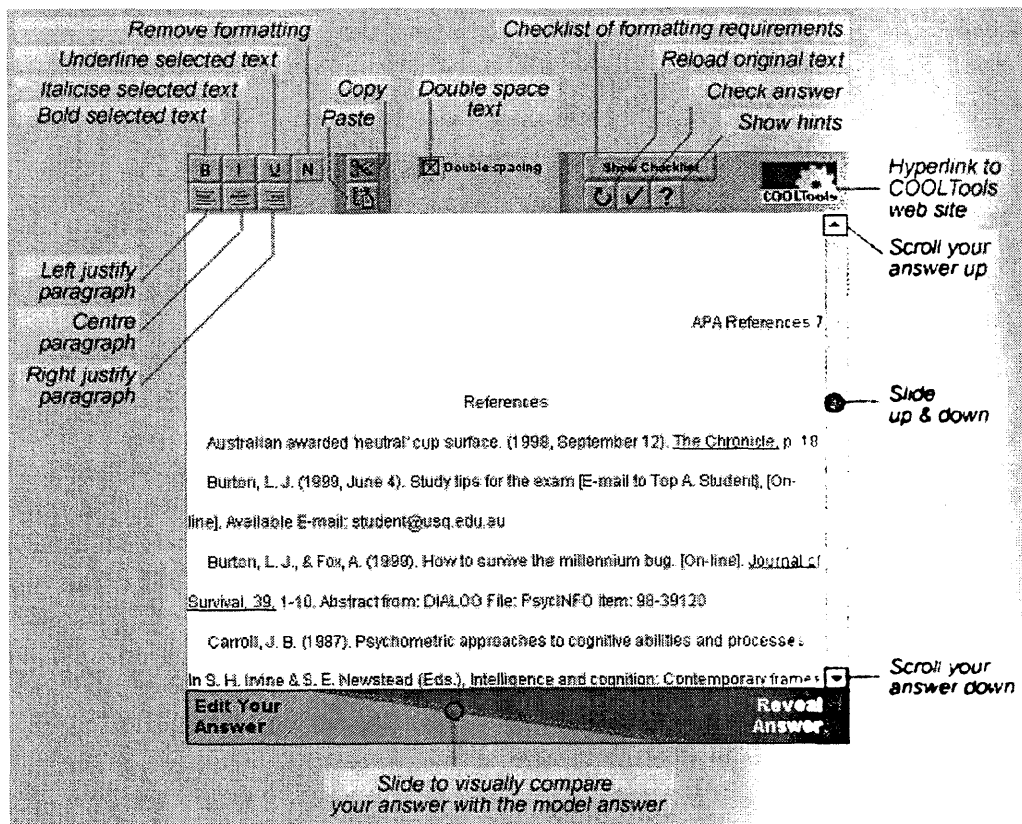


Figure 2:

The Typist tool in Figure 2 shows the next level of the interactive tools for students to practise APA referencing. While the main COOLTool focusses on referencing styles for individual referencing entries, the Typist tool was created to help students move to the next level - compiling a reference list, and a title page - without leaving the site. Once again, feedback and hints were provided.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

Student feedback on the first stage of the project has been extremely positive. Of 104 students in the first trial group, 103 valid responses were received. Students were asked for feedback on four key areas: motivation to use the site, access, usability of the resource, and its value to the user. All except five students were studying first-year psychology, and the mean for time spent trialling the resource was 41.51 minutes. All students said they would recommend the resource to other students.

On the issue of how relevant students believed the interactive exercises would be to their study, more than half of the students nominated the highest rating, with a mean (on a five-point scale) of 3.11. Students commented favourably on the following aspects of the site (again, on a five-point scale, with five the highest level):

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Clarity of instructions	4.2	0.94
Access to support	3.87	0.93

Logical building of skills	4.03	0.85
Moving between sections	4.09	1.47
Navigation buttons	3.90	0.97
Mini-toolbars	3.76	0.93
Links to other sites	4.06	1.63
'Doovey' help feature	4.26	2.19

Students also gave positive ratings to the site in terms of its overall usefulness for: the units they were studying; further study; and for their chosen profession or career.

SUMMARY

Initial responses to the resource have been positive, and further developments have recently been completed. The site is available to all USQ students and staff (password protected), and feedback from all users is encouraged. It is a resource which is part of a suite of support materials provided to USQ students to help them develop useful study skills, and succeed in their chosen courses. The model used for the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* could easily be adapted for other referencing styles, and so could the COOLTools which support it. Thus it offers economies of scale both for academic staff and for technology support services. It also means that students can consolidate their skills and move easily from one form of referencing to another. Further research is planned to determine what long term outcomes emerge in relation to student skills development, independence, and staff time on student feedback.

The development of the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* illustrates many of the benefits and challenges that educators face in the online world. New technologies mean that teaching practices and schedules will become far less rigid. No longer will students be tied down to a particular lecture, tutorial or teleconference time. Students can access the internet at times that suit them best – 24 hours a day – and they want access to learning material at any time. Students are becoming more self-directed. They will be more in charge of when and how they study. As educators, we have to adapt to that new environment and provide learning materials and structures that match the flexibility students demand. We also have to be mindful that many students entering tertiary studies today have grown up in a world where online technologies are the norm not the exception. The *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* are a perfect example of the new breed of teaching resources that can meet the challenges this reality presents.

Importantly, these tools must be developed specifically for the online learning environment, which is quite different from the 'traditional' modes. Educators cannot simply take existing materials and resources used in traditional teaching modes and 'dump' them on the Web. The material should be restructured so that there are direct links between key learning objectives; the material must be designed to facilitate fast download times; and there should be access to support resources and sites so that students do not feel isolated.

While the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* deliver many benefits in enabling students to be more self-directed and self-managed, the downside is this possibility that they will feel isolated. New technologies will mean less face-to-face contact between educators and students. In moving to online delivery, we need to develop mechanisms through which we maintain meaningful and rich relationships with students. Tools such as the interactive

exercises should not become a barrier between teachers and students. They should be used to develop more varied and interesting ways to ensure that such interaction takes place.

Finally, the online world can be a double-edged sword for educators in terms of workload. On the one hand, the administrative workload in activities such as correcting referencing errors and counselling students can be significantly reduced. But educators will also have to take the time to be far more creative and expansive in developing tools such as the *Interactive APA Practice Exercises* for this new environment. Developing material specifically for the online world takes time, effort and resources – but it is the way of the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Daniel, J. (1996) *Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education* (London, Kogan Page).
- Fraser, S. & Deane, E. (1998) *Doers and Thinkers: An Investigation of the Use of Open-Learning Strategies to Develop Life-Long Learning Competencies in Undergraduate Science Students* (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia).
- Melton, R. (1997) *Objectives, Competences & Learning Outcomes: Developing Instructional Materials in Open and Distance Learning* (London, Kogan Page).
- Ottewill, R. & Hudson, A. (1997) Electronic information resource use, *ALT-J Association for Learning Technology Journal*, 5, pp.31-41.
- Rowntree, D. (1991) *Teaching Through Self-Instruction* (London, Kogan Page).
- Phipps, R. & Merisotis, J. (2000) *Quality On the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education* (Washington, The Institute for Higher Education).
- Yetton, P. and Associates (1997) *Managing the Introduction of Technology in the Delivery and Administration of Higher Education* (Canberra, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Commonwealth of Australia).

Tutors supporting students: What do students want?

Anne Gaskell and Ormond Simpson UKOU

Introduction

What types of support do distance education students most value? Previous research from the UK Open University indicates that students consider the most important sources of support to be (in this order):

1) their partners, family and friends 2) other students; 3) their tutor – and 4) the institution (Asbee and Simpson 1998¹).

This paper looks at the third source of support: the tutor. What do students want from their tutor? In a distance education institution opportunities for meeting are available but less frequent than in campus institutions; in the UKOU the main teaching materials are the course units and supplementary material delivered to the student's home or provided via the Internet. The tutor marks assignments, is available for support by phone, letter and sometimes e-mail, and runs either face-to-face tutorials or computer conferences for Internet courses. The number of tutorial hours varies usually from 12 to 40 per year depending on the level and points-rating of the course.

Previous research has looked at student feedback concerning tutorial activities and correspondence tuition (Stevenson et al.²); our survey was concerned with a wider range of tutors' qualities and skills.

In an earlier conference paper (Gaskell and Simpson 2000³) we surveyed students in East Anglia on face-to-face tutorial courses. They were asked to indicate which of a range of cognitive and affective qualities and skills they considered most important in a tutor by completing a questionnaire and rating various skills from 1-10 in order of priority. They were asked to indicate how far they considered it important that 'a tutor should ...'

- A be friendly and approachable
- B mark assignments promptly
- C be easy to get hold of by phone or letter
- D know his/her subject well
- E help you to develop skills such as essay writing
- F run very good face-to-face tutorials
- G give high quality feedback on assignments
- H help you use your study time to best effect
- I understand your concerns and how you feel
- J explain assignment grades clearly

Tutors were also sent the identical list and asked which qualities and skills they, as tutors, considered most important for a student. An overall 'grade' for each 'quality' was calculated – with lower grades indicating higher priority; the results are indicated in table 1. These are based on responses from 272 students and 171 tutors.

In a subsequent survey students on an Internet course with computer conferencing instead of face-to-face tutorials were sent a similar questionnaire [by email].

Findings

1. Students' and tutors' perceptions on face-to-face courses

'A good tutor is essential to aid success, understanding and progress' wrote one student in this survey, indicating the importance of the tutor for distance education students. But what makes a good tutor? Our sample is relatively small, and several students and many tutors commented on difficulties in completing the questionnaire because, as one student said, 'it's very difficult to number these qualities as they are all important!' However, the results are indicative and particularly interesting where there is a substantial difference between tutors' and students' perceptions (defined here as a gap of two or more in the priority 'ratings').

Table 1 column 2 indicates that the two most important qualities for a tutor from a conventional course students' perspective are 'knowing his/her subject very well' and 'being friendly and approachable'. These two qualities scored considerably higher than any others. Mature students often lack confidence and clearly want to be sure of their tutors' knowledge base, but also rate interpersonal skills very highly. This latter finding is comparable with a report by the UK's Further Education Development Agency (FEDA) where 'friendliness of teachers' was consistently rated as the most important for student satisfaction (Davies⁴). The most significant difference in this area appeared to be that e-students rated 'friendliness and approachability' lower than their face-to-face counterparts. It is not clear why this should be so; it may arise from the acknowledged greater difficulty of communicating emotions through text and therefore its lower importance – more research is needed into the nature of electronic discourse. One student commented : (tutors) 'should be able to interpret email and online conferences to better understand how a student is coping with the course material. It is easier to talk to someone face to face and share your issues than to put it into an email'. It may also be that 'approachability' is not perceived as an electronic 'quality'; e-students in the survey certainly commented on the importance of the tutor's manner: 'On-line liasing is less personal than face to face so personalities are less obvious. However, the tutor still needs to be approachable'; 'I don't think it is necessary for Tutors to be excellent at their subject. I think the main priority is approachability and availability'.

Table 1: What are the most important qualities and skills a tutor should possess? - the students' and tutors' perspectives.

Priority	Students	E-students	Tutors
1	Know subject	Know subject	High quality TMAs
2	Friendly	High quality TMAs	Friendly
3	Good tutorials	Good tutorial/conferences	Good tutorials
4	High quality TMAs	Study skills	Know subject
5	Study skills	Friendly	Mark promptly
6	Easy to get hold of	Easy to get hold of	Easy to get hold of
7	Mark promptly	Mark promptly	Understand problems
8	Understand problems	Time management	Study skills
9	Time management	Understand problems	Explain grades
10	Explain grades	Explain grades	Time management

Particularly interesting is the indication that tutors do not regard 'knowing the subject' as important as students; tutors give this a rating of 4 rather than the score of 1 shared by both conventional and e-students. Previous work confirms that students expect tutors to be knowledgeable and know the course intimately and see the tutor as the subject expert with high level cognitive skills. They see a tutor's skills as 'knowledge-based' and tutorials as relatively didactic tutor-centred occasions for students to assimilate what they traditionally understand as 'knowledge' – quantitative data as a set of facts, which can be applied (Stevenson op.cit). Those tutors who responded to our survey may, on the other hand, be more 'progressive' and focus on the learner rather than a traditional 'teacher', seeing themselves as facilitators of students' learning rather than the all-knowing expert. The facilitative style is not always easily undertaken by tutors as Brew and Wright discovered in a survey of the teaching style of UKOU tutor-counsellors (Brew and Wright⁵). While some early online teaching merely replicated traditional didactic styles by, for example, placing traditional materials on the web, there is great potential for electronic media 'to facilitate a migration from traditional didactic modes to more learner-managed learning modes if teachers and designers wish to take such a journey' as Coomey and Stephenson discuss in their paradigm grid for online learning (Coomey and Stephenson 2001⁶)

Also revealing for a distance education institution is the prominence given to running very good face-to-face tutorials –all groups rated this as the third most important of a tutor's skills. This subject elicited more additional comments from students than any other topic, with one student commenting: 'I feel that the quality of the tutorial advice given can very much colour personal motivation during the 'difficult' patches all students go through now and then'.

Written assignments are central to the OU system and it is through comments on assignments that the tutor can best provide individual advice and support on the course work and on skills development. In our survey it was interesting that tutors rated the skills and qualities associated with assignments substantially higher than students did. Tutors consider that giving 'high quality feedback on assignments' is of most importance to students; conventional students however, rate this below knowledge, friendliness and good tutorials. E-students gave it a higher rating - perhaps because this a clear method of feedback when they do not meet their tutor. 'Prompt marking' was also less important to students that tutors appeared to think. This probably reflects the enormous amounts of time tutors spend on marking and the UK OU's quality assurance systems in place to ensure that tutors mark well and promptly. But it may also be the case that students do not use correspondence tuition in quite the way that we expect - they do not rate prompt marking as highly as tutors because it is possible that they are not using the tutors' comments on an assignment to improve their following assignment.

Elsewhere there were suggestions in the comments that students valued highly those areas in which they had encountered problems: for instance being 'easy to get hold of' was rated first by a few students who then commented on difficulties they had encountered with particular tutors. The other major difference between students' and tutors' views related to the development of skills: students considered help with the development of 'skills such as essay writing' their fifth and fourth priority, whereas tutors placed it eighth. Students seem to value learning how to learn as well as specific course content - and our group of students consisted of both new and experienced students. Skills development thus seems to be valued as an ongoing process throughout the students' University career rather than as a single event, as something introductory or as skills delivered separately from the course content.

Issues

1. General.

The findings challenge some of the previously held assumptions about what students value in distance learning and also indicate that the priorities of students and tutors are not always identical. From the evidence cited here it is apparent that, even with relatively little face-to-face contact the ideal tutor should be much more than a subject expert. Distance students value a range of cognitive and affective skills in their tutors and consider the friendliness of the tutor and face-to-face contact very important.

Differences between tutors' and students' perceptions of importance may indicate varying perceptions of the nature of knowledge - as quantitative, delivered by a teacher centred approach leading to the assimilation of information, or qualitative, based on a student centred approach leading to the ordering of ideas (Brew and Wright op cit.). Students in this survey placed cognitive skills first and this raises several crucial issues: how far should there be congruence between students' expressed preferences and institutional offerings? Clearly there should be some congruence, but how far do we need to challenge students' preconceptions about knowledge-based teaching to enable them to develop? E-students share many similar concerns with conventional students suggesting that the learning experiences have similarities even if the media differ. However, electronic media have much potential for development even if a further irony is that 'taking a learner-centred perspective on these new opportunities is that this focuses us strongly on what the teacher/educational designer needs to do to maximise students' learning from experience. This focus on what the teacher is doing to

enable learning may be seen to be contrary to current rhetoric surrounding student-centred learning' (Alexander and Boud 2001⁷)

Ultimately, distance learning is increasingly dominated by the discourse of the 'learning market' (Edwards⁸), with students viewed as consumers. Within this framework it is important to discover both what students say they want and how this can be delivered synergistically with existing learning priorities

2. Staff selection.

If we decide that we need to take students' expectations into account then that has implications for the person specification and competence for tutor posts. It may be for example that 'approachability' – however assessed – will need to be as important as a candidate's knowledge base and formal qualifications. Equally a candidate's experience and abilities in the development of student learning skills may well take on a more important role in their selection as students rated this factor highly.

3. Staff Development

Equally the emphasis for staff development may need to be more from (say) teaching skills to the development of empathic skills and the ability to understand and respond to students' feelings, particularly feelings of hesitancy, uncertainty and inadequacy. Such staff development can probably only take place through the processes of experience and reflection described by Kolb⁹ which has implications for both the topics and processes of staff development sessions.

4. Staff appraisal

If students' expectations are to be met there will be consequences for how tutorial and support staff are appraised. Again qualities and competencies of approachability and 'learning skill development ability' will need to be monitored. Appropriate methods of doing that monitoring will need to be developed.

Clearly such methods may be tendentious: one person's approachability may be another person's 'effusiveness'. And some modes of communication such as the telephone will be very hard to monitor. On the other hand some modes may be easier: in courses which use computer conferencing for example the tutor's approachability might be assessed from their e-mail exchanges with students. But that relies on exploring methods for expressing warmth and support through e-mail and conferencing?

5. Importance and Satisfaction

Finally if we take students' expectations into account then that may offer a method of assessing priorities within the areas of student support. If as well as asking students what factors they find most important they are asked how satisfied they are with that factor then it is possible to draw up a grid.

Higher Importance to students

	Area where resources may be need to be transferred in	Area where resources match importance	
Students Express Lower satisfaction	Area where resources match importance	Area where resources may be transferred out	Students Higher satisfaction

Lower importance to students

Fig 1. Importance vs Satisfaction grid adapted from FEDA (1999)

Then items that are rated both highly as important and highly satisfactory by students may well be appropriately supported and resourced by the institution: items that are important but unsatisfactory may need more support and resource, which may just be derived from the satisfactory but less important area.

However these are substantial conclusions to draw from what is a comparatively small sample: the authors hope to repeat and extend this work at some early point in the future.

References

1. Asbee, S., and Simpson, O. (1998), 'Partners, family, friends: student support of the closest kind', *Open Learning* 13 (3).
2. Stevenson, K., Sander, P., and Naylor, P. (1996), 'Student perceptions of the tutor's role in distance learning', *Open Learning* 11 (1).
3. Gaskell, A., and Simpson, O. (2000), 'Student support in distance education - what do students want from their tutor?', conference paper, EDEN Prague 2000.
4. Davies, P. (1998), 'What makes for a satisfied student?' , *FEDA Bulletin* 2 (7).
5. Brew, A. and Wright, T. (1990), 'Changing teaching styles', *Distance Education* 11 (2), 1992.
6. Coomey, M., and Stephenson, J., (2001) 'Online learning: it is all about dialogue, involvement, support and control', in Stephenson, J., (ed) (2001), *Teaching and Learning Online*, London, Kogan Page.
7. Alexander, S., and Boud, D. (2001), 'Learners still learn from experience when online', in Stephenson, J., (ed.) (2001), *Teaching and Learning Online*, London, Kogan Page.

8. Edwards, R. (1997), *Changing places? Flexibility, lifelong learning and a learning society*, London, Routledge.
9. Kolb, D.A., (1993), 'The process of experiential learning', in Thorpe, M., Edwards, R., and Hanson, A., (ed) (1993) *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*, London, Routledge.

Remembering our common work: students, teachers and administrators in open learning

Alan Mandell and Lee Herman
The State University of New York/Empire State College, U.S.A.

"All the fine enthusiasms that've gone down the drain."
Jack Kerouac, *some of the dharma*, Book 3

I. Two Cases: A Beginning

Alex walks nervously into my office to learn how our college works and to plan a first independent study with me. Now in his mid-twenties and living on his own since he was 15, he had never graduated high school, but managed to pass an exam, which secured him a diploma. Alex then enrolled in several required liberal arts courses at another college. He did poorly in all of them, even though as tells me while sweating and fidgeting in his chair, he's interested in psychology, philosophy and writing. Alex wants to continue reading in and writing about those subjects, which he has done on his own for some years while working as a laborer at a local steel mill. His schedule of rotating 12-hour shifts made it all but impossible for him to meet the attendance requirements of any college he'd found so far. And, on top of that, Alex simply hated school.

Alex did have clusters of time during which he could follow his intellect. I asked him what he'd been reading, what he'd been thinking about, and what kind of writing he liked to do. He offered me a short list. It included Freud and Goethe (which he pronounced "goth"); he also wrote poems and meditations in his journal. I could easily feel his eagerness as well as his anxiety. He seemed to want to learn everything all at once. However, Alex also feared that he just wasn't smart enough for college and, perhaps even more, that another school experience would twist and squash the learning he deeply cared about.

He and I struggled to find focus and organization for a first tutorial. We searched for a question, a theme, a topic that would both engage his expansive interests and offer him a manageable frame within which to pursue them. This fascinating problem was difficult enough, but two additional worries hovered over our discussion. First, Alex's company was only willing to pay for studies that were "work-related." Second, Alex and I had to face a set of course requirements, which this college had recently imposed upon all its students. These courses, as many as ten, are "general education" studies. Some people might think them necessary for any well educated citizen. But the imposition of this claim on all students is precisely the kind of "school" demand that would drive someone like Alex away.

Doris is quite proud of what she has accomplished. After completing high school, she found a secretarial job, married, raised three children, and also intensely devoted herself to her church and its community activities. With the full encouragement of her company, she became more and more adept with computers and at supervising a small staff, to the point where she had mastered the skills, though she lacked the title, of I.T. manager.

During our initial conversations, I understood as well as Doris did that she was professionally stuck without a college degree. With twenty-five years of experience, Doris could, I was sure, earn substantial credits for the skills and knowledge she'd acquired along the way. Her apparent competencies in technology, in administration, and in effectively dealing with people will nicely support and get her very close to her life's goal of managing a church-based service agency. But she had no degree.

Doris had never been to college and worried that her age and her lack of a formal academic background would impede her success. I knew that her enthusiasm, her religious values, and her experiential learning would all but ensure her success and would open all kinds of possibilities for simultaneously planning her undergraduate degree and her professional career. And when I then discover that Doris loves to see films and is looking forward to learning more about them, I am was yet again struck by the power and expanse of her inquisitiveness. I'm sure she can make it.

But, we are not operating in a vacuum. Her company will fund her college education only to the extent that her degree focuses on business. Her very busy life--filled with work, family and church--conspires against the pattern and pace of any typical academic calendar. In so many ways, Doris has been a dutiful learner. She learned how to be a spouse and parent; she learned what her company asked of her; and she learned the traditions and the authority of her faith. But now, at this time in her life, she has found her own path. She knows what she wants to learn and why she wants to learn it. This knowledge is based on the rich "general education" of her life, and Doris, no less than Alex, for her own good reasons, does not want to adhere to a set of academic requirements which will obstruct her learning.

II. Principle and Practice

The principles from which our academic practices flow are often neglected in our discussions of educational policy and administration. That is, the link between sound education and a suitable organization for it is broken. This problem can be, to some extent, attributed to an over-emphasis in universities, especially large and "mega-universities," on cost, access, and quality. Those normal criteria of administrative decisions have been deformed. They become obsessions: with cost as maximum yield of measurable product for minimum investment; with access as market penetration into the broadest groups with the greatest ability to pay; and with quality as the transformation of learning into homogeneous standardized outcomes. These distortions, however damaging to learning, support the fantasy of a literally Global University (the GU). In this global system every student learns the same things in the same way according to the same tests and for the same costs. Moreover, the rules governing these matters are set by those few who presume to know what is best for everyone.

Our purposes in this paper are to set out a few "maxims" of good teaching and learning, and then to apply those maxims to the forms and routines in which we work and our students learn. We shall suppose that these maxims really govern our institutions and thus will change them.

To be sure, our maxims are debatable. In fact, we use the word "maxims" here to not because we believe them to be immutable and self evidently true, but simply to indicate that within

this context we are using them as starting points. Our maxims have emerged through our years as teachers, advisors and administrators at a public university for adults in the United States. We have had the pleasure of discussing some of them at prior Cambridge Conferences.

This paper, we hope, will serve as a reminder of a rather bland and simple point: principles are important. But the point needs minding now because all of us are working during a time of frenzied institution-building and because the power of those regional, national and truly global academies is unprecedented. Without taking principled care, we may find that, quite contrary to our intent, we exacerbate social injustices and systematize plainly poor learning.

III. Five "Maxims" of Good Education

1) Authority and Uncertainty: Act so that what you believe you know is only provisionally true.

This is the most fundamental maxim of the five. We take it from the Socratic effort to learn wisdom, which is to claim to know only that one does not yet know. Institutions of learning gain their power because they are repositories of knowledge and expertise. However, they gain their legitimate authority because they are places of inquiry where knowledge claims are questioned and expertise is uncertain. Inevitably, faculty and administrators exercise power over each other and over students. But, in keeping with the provisionality of knowing, administrators are responsible for making rules that are not absolute and that preserve openings for interpretation and change. And, by the same token, faculty are responsible for being as critical of their own knowledge claims as they are of their students'. In this way, administrators guard the academy from the deadening consequences of power propelled by fashionable ideas; and teachers inspire their students to become makers of ideas by respecting the lure of truth.

2) Diversity of Curriculum: People learn best when they learn what draws their curiosity.

Standardized curricula rest on the supposition that experts can judge what knowledge is most worth having. However, scholars of learning know that what is known and its value vary with cultures, with time, with status, and with the interests and abilities of individuals. Even so, faculty and administrators influence what students will learn and how they will do so. However, with a self-critical eye on their own influence, administrators are responsible for preserving the ability of faculty and students to decide what valuable educations will be. And, in the same spirit, faculty are responsible for respecting and sustaining the wonder of each one of their students.

An authoritarian curriculum suppresses wonder. An indefinite diversity of learning opportunities invites people to turn their curiosities into inquiries that work and last.

3) Communication and Collaboration: Continue the inquiry until all the participants fully offer their opinions, including the reasons for them.

Universities deserve prestige because they are communities of scholarship. They are due respect because they are communities in which intellectual freedom holds full sway. This freedom is essential if the tension between the provisionality of knowledge claims and the search for truth is to thrive. Administrators ought to be leaders of a community in which rules

and structures support collaborative decisions and do not mystify or abort communication. Faculty ought to guide discussions so they and their students gain practice in a polity in which people are free to say what they think, to be heard, and to be responsible for considering the implications of their ideas.

4) Integration of Functions and Roles: Treat all participants to an inquiry as whole persons.

Like all complex organizations, universities work efficiently through the division of labor and responsibility. Similarly, the strength of the intellectual expertise housed in universities depends upon divisions of knowledge into specialties. But without integration and permeability among specialties, ideas become trivial and intellectual authority becomes officious. Help that truly nurtures and education that lasts cares little for such constrictions. Such learning addresses the lives of people in all their aspects, their capacities, and their concerns. In an integrated university, administrators and their staff must be teachers and learners. Faculty must teach by attending to the connections between their expertise and other areas of learning, as well as to the range of their students' experiences and commitments. In this way, administrators and faculty become effective and caring counselors, advocates, facilitators and teachers. Moreover, administrators, faculty and students too will see each other, not just as components of a system, but as members of a human community.

5) Diversity of Outcomes and Quality Control: Assume predictable outcomes and standards of evaluation, like all other knowledge claims, are incomplete.

Every organization, including the academy, is expected to guarantee its product; thus, every organization tests. But schools carry a special evaluative burden. They are responsible for conserving the knowledge and meanings of a dominant, relatively homogeneous culture. However, schools also are responsible for recognizing new knowledge and meanings. Thus, not only must they use reasonable and fair criteria for judging learning and awarding degrees. They also must remain true to the understanding that knowledge claims are unpredictably diverse and inherently provisional. Administrators must not reduce standards of admission, achievement, and graduation to what can be unequivocally measured. And faculty must devise criteria for and ways of evaluating learning, which appreciate the diversity of student purposes, abilities, and academic entry points. Rather than testing for correctness and certifying closure, evaluators should inspire learning and reflection, including their own.

IV. Applying the Maxims to the Cases

How should we respond to Alex and Doris according to these maxims alone?

Both of these students need university degrees. A sufficiently convenient curriculum and schedule, combined with a welcoming and encouraging staff could help them succeed in an otherwise conventional academic system. Modern and savvy universities now offer night and weekend classes, courses on the Web, and firm but supportive counseling that is sensitive to the exigencies of the lives of adult students. In all but the most exclusive institutions, these kinds of services are taken for granted. Today's university will allow Alex to take a course on Freud or Goethe, and to take a course on creative writing once he has fulfilled the general requirements and committed himself to a program of professional studies that his company will fund. With appropriate testing, Doris would probably be placed in more advanced

information technology courses. Moreover, she would be allowed to choose among a variety of offerings on religion and on film, once she too has completed the set of general education requirements. In effect, both Alex and Doris would be free to indulge their individual interests as long as they were willing, in the main, to do what was expected of them. Access results from a quite simple deal--a bargain made between the student and the academic organization. The university retains control of curriculum and standards, and it conforms to the surrounding system of values and power. Students acquire degrees, marketable career training, a version of liberal arts education, and some freedom to choose what they really want to learn.

But, there is a tension. The full and inquisitive minds of Alex and Doris will chafe against enormously powerful academic conventions that simply do not recognize who they are. Moreover, the authority of those conventions rests upon the presumption that the university, as a community of scholars and as a gatekeeper institution, knows what is best to learn, how it should be learned, and when it should be learned. The elaborate rules, procedures, and vocabulary Alex and Doris must follow will admit only a small portion of the learning they already have and will strictly regulate the flow of curiosity that animates them.

Nonetheless, these two students prudentially looking at their options in light of their goals might well adapt. They will accept the bargain and learn as they are told. They will decide to believe what they are told is best for them. However, if they retain the spirit and energy of their inquisitiveness, they will remember the difference between their desire to learn and their pragmatic acceptance of learned authority.

Alex and Doris will no doubt also believe that the tension stimulated by this memory is their responsibility. But, fundamentally, this tension grows from an organizational culture housing two opposing principles. The university presents itself as the imperator of a society's legitimate knowledge. Yet, as the protector of learning, the university must also nurture unlimited inquiry. That obligation requires all knowledge claims be considered incomplete and provisional. The first principle allows the university to tell Alex and Doris what is best for them. The second principle requires the university to doubt its own authority and, giving Alex and Doris the benefit of that doubt, to help them learn as their curiosity and questions lead.

Our first maxim of education gives precedence to the second principle. No person or institution, however learned, can claim the truth. If we are wise, the best we can do is offer the beliefs and skills we've acquired through our intellectual efforts and the certainty that our best ideas must be opened and changed as we continue to learn. Administrators must protect Alex and Doris from the imposition of a required curriculum, no matter how imperiously currently celebrated cultural authorities demand one. Faculty must place all their own abilities as learners in the service of helping Alex articulate an idea or question he cherishes and which he can use as a clear line of inquiry through his many interests. And faculty must help Doris create a satisfying and workable mixture of studies, which accommodates the many demands of her life, takes advantage of her technological expertise, and which responds to her ultimate professional and spiritual goals.

Since, as our second maxim stipulates, people learn best what draws their curiosity, faculty and administrators should expect that curricula will emerge with unpredictable diversity. This

means that faculty must listen for and learn about what their students want to learn. Administrators must promote that kind of dialogue within the institution, as well as advertise its integrity and value to the outside world.

In order to plan his initial study, Alex and his faculty mentor have several long conversations. It became clear that he needed to be reassured that his interests and questions could become topics of legitimate academic inquiry. Alex and his mentor began to focus on the conflict he was experiencing between conventional learning demands and the integrity of his real learning interests. Having become familiar with Alex's interests in psychology and philosophy, his mentor suggested that he explore this conflict over what is to be learned and how by reading Vivian Paley's *You Can't Say, You Can't Play*, and Plato's *Apology*. Then, to examine the same conflict between the individual and convention in terms of modern debates about curriculum, Alex, also at his mentor's suggestion, read work by John Dewey and E.D. Hirsch.

Unlike Alex, Doris has no trouble specifically saying what she wants to learn. However, she has trouble imagining how her seemingly disparate interests will cohere within a single undergraduate curriculum that also suits her professional goal. As Alex's mentor did, Doris's mentor suggests that they make her "trouble" into a topic of academic inquiry. This inquiry would result in Doris constructing an appropriate interdisciplinary degree plan--an individualized curriculum. They therefore create a study through which Doris can discover and investigate themes touching upon her several interests, which include technology, communication, helping people, and spirituality. At her mentor's suggestion, she uses writings by Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Riane Eisler, among others. These authors might provide a context of ideas that she can turn to as she makes decisions about her degree plan.

It is clear that neither Doris nor Alex is beginning to study in the conventional way. A curriculum is not handed to them, and they are not starting out with the traditional "survey" of the academic disciplines. It is therefore necessary that an institutional structure of both policy and procedure must allow these departures from convention. Such a flexible structure is necessarily an administrative creation, and it must be maintained by administrators who understand and value this kind of inquiry and the diversity of curricula which result from it. Equally important, this commitment must extend through all levels of the organization. Whether senior managers or public relations professionals, all must take pride in this particular educational endeavor and be well prepared and forthright in advertising its integrity beyond the institution.

The third maxim stipulates a truly collaborative and communicatively open polity of learning. As any study develops, three moments of shifting authority usually occur. At first, faculty mentors listen closely and check that they are hearing their students accurately. Then, faculty make some specific suggestions about readings and organizing the inquiry. But, once the study is well underway, in a third moment, the authority shifts toward the students, who will often propose their own ideas about how to continue.

After beginning with the four books and the study focus proposed by his mentor, Alex said that he wanted to alter the focus a bit to include some work on the dynamics of social convention. He proposed reading Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* and something by Marx. His mentor agreed and as they discussed these new materials, they realized that the

"course" truly belonged to both of them. Similarly, Doris's readings helped her articulate more and more clearly the questions and topics which really engaged her. Her responses helped both mentor and student see how her interests could cohere into an academically strong program of study. This vision of the whole emerged over time; it could only have come about through their collaboration.

To permit this approach to creating individual studies and entire degree programs, an administrative structure is necessary, which is not only generally flexible but is open to multiple and unpredictable improvisations. Nonetheless, learning must be documented. The fluidity of the inquiry process must be orderly and equitable; colleagues have to be able to tell what students have learned; and the public to which the institution is beholden, must have some means of being informed about the legitimacy of the learning which occurs. Administrators thus have to design and maintain a records system, an institutional memory, which suits the suppleness of the learning process. The system should be simply operated, and should be clearly intelligible to everyone--to students, to faculty, to managers, and to the public. In this way, the institution is demystified both to the community of scholars and to the community at large.

A modern university that honors collaborative education will inevitably be a complex organization with an elaborate division of labor. However, mirroring the actual learning process, this collaboration, as the fourth maxim requires, must occur at the interstices between each role and every other. As we have already suggested, administrators need to deeply understand and involve themselves in the teaching/learning process. The flexibility of schedule, curriculum, and planning, which Alex and Doris require in order to follow their inquiries, demands closely attended and rapid adjustments. Only administrators who themselves are very involved with students will be this responsive. Indeed, they very likely should remain teachers, ones who are still eager to learn how to make things work for their students. Similarly, in order for faculty to maintain the institution's elasticity, they must thoroughly understand and participate fluently in managing the administrative system.

In conventional universities, academic freedom is acquired through distance from management. But in a genuinely collaborative learning community, freedom means engagement. And not only with administrators and administrative systems. Faculty mentors have to engage with their students across a very broad range of concerns. Alex's faculty mentor was able to help him design a carefully focused study on the conflict between the individual and society by appreciating how Alex's initially vague but passionate concern with that issue grew out his particular life history. In the same way, Doris's faculty mentor had to listen to and "mirror" the complex aggregation of her life goals so as to be able to recommend readings which could help her pull together her interests into an academically sound and personally satisfying degree program. It should be evident that faculty in this community are no longer merely professing. They are simultaneously counseling, advising, manipulating an administrative system, structuring independent studies that follow ideas across disciplines, questioning and tutoring, suggesting readings to their students and taking reading suggestions from them.

Administrators teach; teachers administrate and counsel; administrators and teachers learn. This integration of roles in all its fine elaboration can only hold if the student is at the center. In fact, students, like administrators and teachers, must take on a new role. Doris has to articulate what she wants from her education, and she has to tell her mentor what she believes

she's already learned--from database management to church liturgy. Alex needs to explain the connection between his abstract interests and his life history. Further, he must show his mentor what sort of academic arrangement will work for him. Like good administrators, Alex and Doris take responsibility for managing their education. Like good teachers, they have to make sure "their teachers" understand them. In the society implied by the fourth maxim, members are not fixed to functions in a system. Their common work as administrators, teachers, and students expresses their wholeness. In order to do their work, they have to see each other as members of a human community.

The fifth maxim requires that Alex and Doris, their mentors, and their university's administrators be responsible to several communities: the university itself, the larger world of higher learning, and the vocational or professional communities which these students hope to join. Accountability to standards of learning--quality control-- is necessary. But how then will Alex and Doris be evaluated? What criteria will be used to honor the diverse individuality of their learning? And how will those criteria clearly accord with standards that are both common and fair?

Just as knowledge claims are provisional, so the exact outcomes of Alex and Doris's learning activities should not be specified in advance. It would be comfortable and seemingly fair for Alex's mentor to stipulate at the beginning just what he should learn about Freud, Plato, or Vivian Paley. To use a standardized test to evaluate what he has learned would thus be convenient and reasonable. However, at the heart of Alex's learning project is the exploration of an idea--the tension between individuality and society. He is trying to uncover its meanings, particularly to understand himself better. Alex does not know what he will find in the contact he makes with those readings. Though having a greater knowledge of the texts than Alex does, his mentor cannot know what Alex will or should discover for himself.

Doris's mentor can certainly construct an academically strong curriculum, even one that touches on most of what her mentor understands to be her interests. But the mentor's plan of study will not serve as a meaningful template for judging what Doris says she wants to learn. The mentor's curriculum can never be her education. Like Alex's mentor, Doris's cannot know in advance just what will suit her. And even Doris cannot know in advance just what she will discover she needs to learn.

But from the start, Alex, Doris, and their mentors do share some common learning expectations: that the students will become clearer, more precise with, and more informed about their own discoveries, whatever they are; and that they will be able to apply those ideas to their lives and to shaping the learning they plan to do. Alex's learning will be whatever questions or themes he raises as a result of the reading and reflection he is doing now. Doris, however, will be building an entire degree program plan. The work of both students will be assessed by them and by their mentors in part by these "products," which they will have created from the discoveries they make. They will have had to read accurately, analyze carefully, credibly defend their own interpretations, and make reasonable connections both among the texts and to their own experiences and purposes. These intellectual skills and the products Alex and Doris create with them can serve as the points of reference for making judgments about the learning they have achieved. When Alex and Doris's mentors prepare evaluations of their learning, or better yet, when student and mentor collaborate in evaluating the learning, they will have to describe how the studies progressed according to those standards. These evaluative criteria are roomy enough to be adapted by faculty to individual

and diverse inquiries. But they are also easily understood and are consistent, as a responsible administrator should explain, with quite ordinary academic expectations.

The current rage for outcomes assessment and quality control in education is driven by a passion for certainty. If the desire to know were replaced by the fantasy of certainty, then learning could be reduced to a perfect system of measurement. The learning Alex and Doris really achieved would disappear and so would the possibility of noticing the discoveries each made. In such a world, surprise is forbidden and wonder killed.

V. The Real World

The five maxims do not describe the real world, except in so far as our non-traditional and experimental universities still preserve some gripping memories of their birthrights. Universities, like all institutions, forget and ossify. And thus even institutions of "open and distance learning," however different they claim to be, mimic that which they were created to transform: Students learn and, with little democratic restraint, teachers teach, advisors advise, and managers administer. This division of labor suits the global regime of huge, complex formal organizations. That is, most socially valued human activity, including higher learning, occurs within arrangements of power that distribute opportunity and reward according to basic economic criterion: Cheaply acquired inputs are worked upon with highly specialized techniques, by replaceable laborers, to produce maximum outputs of stable things and services. This rule is applied everywhere, from the manufacture of pints to the education of students.

Critics often lament that this dehumanizing system is malevolently, ineptly and/or complacently administered. While at the micro-level of everyday interaction, this criticism might hold, at the macro-level of regional, national and global social systems, no one and no group is in charge of anything. As Anthony Giddens says, we live in a "runaway world." Today, the sheer size, complexity and omnipresence of organizations means that they are broadly "distributed," both internally and in their reach. Thus, whether an Open University or a General Electric, and no matter how elegant the edifice of official control might be, institutional domains live on their own in a chaos of rationalization. Neither CEOs nor university chancellors, no more than professors, can be drastically deviant "change agents" without driving away their "customers," alienating their workers, losing their market and finally their jobs.

So, what is to be done? How do students, teachers and administrators, guided by maxims of sound education, find the freedom and the wherewithal to change and humanize their universities?

First, every institution must attend to the reasons it exists, and part of the mission of every university, even the most conventional one, is to create ideas which are taken seriously. It would violate the essential identity of educators to simply dismiss principles of good education, like our five maxims, as unrealistic. However faint, the memory of principle must still inform educational practice. Without this attentiveness, the language through which open, distance or collaborative learning universities understand, legitimate and market themselves will inevitably lose its meaning and credibility. Thus, the hope of institutional reform today rests in part on the necessity that educators, whatever their specialized functions, remain intellectuals.

Second, the jumble of every large organization breeds openings for change. Our maxims, particularly the fourth, point to a community in which identities are not reified. Administrators, faculty and even students are all teachers, learners and managers. Thanks to the ironic and unintended flexibilities of any system driving toward total rationalization and control, these role transgressions can occur quite easily and safely. Teachers can manage administrative mechanisms; administrators can devote themselves to the practices and principles of teaching; and students can become experienced collaborators in determining what and how they learn.

These transgressions are not hypothetical. In various ways, opportunities for transformative deviance present themselves everyday. Sometimes, perhaps with difficulty, we act on them. When we do, we practice the epistemology of democracy. This is our common work. We teach and learn citizenship, an education which might spread through the academy and beyond. Fortunately, Doris and Alex are real.

Marginalisation removed or remodelled? A special role for learner support in transforming open and distance education in South Africa.

Vaughn John
Centre for Adult Education
School of Education, Training and Development
University of Natal
Email: johnv@nu.ac.za

“Successful policy must overcome an historically determined pattern of fragmentation, inequality and inefficiency. It must increase access for black, women, disabled and mature students, and generate new curricula and flexible models of learning and teaching, including modes of delivery, to accommodate a larger and more diverse student population.”
Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997)

The above quotation sets out the goals that have shaped policy development within the South African higher education sector over the last five years. The ministry of education was then responding to fairly damning evaluations of the higher education system, including its distance education component. A common feature of past provision of distance education was the intake of large numbers of learners, poor learner support and very low completion rates (SAIDE, 1995). Teacher education provided at a distance had, in particular, received extremely negative appraisals and had earned something of a stigma. These were all substantial challenges facing policy makers. One of the key challenges was to transform an educational system which had marginalised large groups of South Africans. Apart from addressing marginalisation, what is also evident from the opening quotation, is the expectation of higher enrollments and the utilisation of flexible modes of delivery. Given the consolidation of public higher education institutions that has taken place, open and distance methods for delivery of higher education will be relied upon to meet national targets.

We are now emerging from an intensive and somewhat exhausting period of policy development. Within higher education, the policy development phase has culminated with the release of the National Plan for Higher Education (March 2001). This document outlines the many goals and challenges facing this sector. The level of change that is anticipated in higher education marks a serious milestone and has been described by the Minister of Education as a “landmark in the history of higher education” which will “shape the transformation of the system for decades to come”(Ministry of Education, 2001). In creating this National Plan a number of national goals and priorities are being addressed through such policy and include the issues of access, equity, quality and redress. Given the importance of open and distance methods for the current plans, this paper intends to illustrate and caution that these goals and priorities as tabled in the National Plan will only be realisable via open and distance learning, if such learning systems include adequate and appropriate learner support.

There has been a proliferation of open and distance learning programmes within higher education over the past few years. A number of traditionally face-to-face institutions have transformed themselves into mixed-mode institutions, where distance learning methods is increasingly employed in combination with some form of face-to-face contact. This paper examines some of the challenges introduced when attempting to respond to the policy goals outlined by the ministry in its National Plan via a mixed-mode programme. This examination will be based on the experience gained in the largest open learning programme at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg (UNP), South Africa. UNP offers a Bachelor of Education, Honours (BEd (Hons)) programme through mixed-mode delivery, involving a combination of materials-based learning with contact tutorial sessions at learning centres situated around the country. The programme is a good example of a programme that has successfully responded to some of the national goals. However, the experience in this new programme has illuminated a number of challenges that come with such transformation and all of them point to the role that learner support could play. On the basis of the UNP BEd (Hons) experience, I believe that the challenges posed by the transformation goals highlight the importance of broader or comprehensive learner support provision that is integrally located within the academic programme. I will argue, as alluded to in the title of this paper, that without such learner support, new forms of marginalisation could be created.

Within the goals of “Access, Equity, Redress, Quality, Efficiency” is an attempt to increase participation of previously marginalised persons (in particular Black persons and women), to remove barriers to participation and success, and to do all of this with increased quality and cost-effectiveness. There is an expressed desire to expand provision but not the number of institutions. The government target is to increase participation in higher education from its current 15% to 20% over the next five to ten years. The goal of efficiency, then, relates to better provision for larger numbers and more diverse groups within the constraints of limited resources.

It is this last statement that sets the stage for a significant contribution through a mixed-mode learning programme such as the UNP BEd (Hons). In examining the profile of the learners on this programme, the programme has to be commended for the manner in which it has increased access for historically marginalised persons. The learners are predominantly black, mostly women and amongst them are many from rural areas. All of these learners are mature persons who have been afforded the opportunity to study while working. There is also evidence indicating that they are enrolled on a programme that provides high quality materials (see Bertram, 2001). Perhaps most significantly, most of these learners have been able to enrol for postgraduate education despite their lack of a first degree (only 16% have a degree). So while entry is not open, access has been eased. Most learners would not have been able to study at the University of Natal via traditional delivery methods which is the core modus operandi of the institution. The programme has thus brought large numbers of previously marginalised learners “into” the university. Furthermore, apartheid education had ensured that these learners had received poor formal schooling and often inferior training as teachers in teacher training colleges. In terms of their professional credentials, they could also be seen as suffering from a form of “status marginalisation” within their profession. Apart from their intellectual development, the offering of a postgraduate degree from a relatively reputable university also presented these learners with an attractive option for improving their status.

The process of transformation and addressing such marginalisation presents many challenges. I would like to refer to a few of these challenges as a way of highlighting the need for a more comprehensive programme of learner support. The examples offered are drawn from a small-scale qualitative study involving focus groups and interviews with learners, tutors, administrators and materials developers of the UNP BEd (Hons) programme (see John, 2000).

With the history of inferior education under apartheid and a present schooling system that is massively dysfunctional in many areas (Vinjevold and Taylor, 1999), the “new higher education learner” is entering in a state of unpreparedness. Large amounts of support are required to give such learners a real and fair chance of successful completion. As evidenced by the implementation of academic development programmes and foundation courses at universities, the need for learner support could be argued to be the case irrespective of the mode of education involved. If, however, the mode of education that these learners engage in involves some form of distance education methods that depend on a significant portion of independent study, then arguably, more attention needs to be given to the support that is offered. Attempting to counteract the effects of a poor school education and provide an equal opportunity in a massified higher education system is virtually impossible without carefully planned learner support. In writing about the South African distance education context, Randell and Bitzer (1998) note that, “Overcoming years of reinforcement of a teacher-focused model of teaching and learning and changing underlying conceptions of learning and teaching will be a lengthy process requiring a great deal of skillful professional development” (p. 139).

An example that illustrates this is that in the BEd (Hons) programme, many learners showed signs of unpreparedness for the “facilitative approach” adopted by the programme. Focus group discussions with learners revealed that there was a mismatch between what learners had expected of a tutor during tutorials and what the institution had asked tutors to do. Tutors were instructed during their training that they were not employed to teach the course, but merely to facilitate the tutorial session according to the tutorial plan. They were expected to have been through all the material and to then generate discussion by engaging learners with pre-designed learning activities. Learners however, reported considerable dissatisfaction with what they described as “ill-prepared tutors”. For the learner a preferred tutor was someone who “knew their stuff” or who were able to “clarify their problems”. These learners were voting in favour of a more directive style or didactic approach rather than the facilitative approach encouraged by the programme designers. Interviews with tutors confirmed this problem of learners expecting and wanting to be “taught” during tutorials. Some tutors openly complained about the lack of “learner-directed learning” on the part of learners.

While there is still debate on where to pitch a session on the facilitative-didactic spectrum (Simpson, 2000), the problem experienced in the BEd (Hons) seems to stem from a lack of exposure or orientation on the part of these learners to a style of learning that is so typical of higher education. In enrolling learners unfamiliar to such a learning environment, it becomes incumbent on the providers to orientate and prepare learners for the form of tutoring that they will receive. This is a form of learner support that could help them to adjust their expectations at the outset. On the basis of a study of learner support at some South African institutions, May (2000) recommends the implementation of learning and teaching contracts as a mechanism for clarifying roles and responsibilities and for inducting new learners and staff.

A second example of this lack of preparedness on the part of learners is found in the manner in which some learners had viewed the series of learning activities included in the material. Some learners had adopted the view that the learning activities were simply supplementary to the rest of the text which could be read through, or thought that the activities were intended as mainly preparation for examination. Such perceptions are seriously counterproductive to the course designer's aims of creating an active learning situation. This problem could be related to the lack of familiarity with interactive learning materials, a skill required for postgraduate university study employing distance methods, but one unlikely to have been developed by these learners "entering" the university for the first time. The situation is best described by one of the BEd (Hons) course developers when she wrote, "What we have now, is a student body who in the main, have very little, and in many cases, no experience of the types of reading, writing and discourse demands the BEd (Hons) programme makes of them" (Thomson, 2001). This then means that attempts to engage learners in a "guided didactic conversation" (Holmberg cited in Jarvis, 1995) is severely undermined. Furthermore, learners fail to develop the "meta-skill" that Wright (1992) argues is so important in order to gain in "personal power" or the "potential for action" (p.122).

Increasing the number of black learners and women is part of the redress aimed for in national policy and the UNP BEd (Hons) could justifiably claim to be making a major contribution to this national goal. However, such a learner profile introduces the need for particular types of learner support. Three-quarters of the learners are Black women. Problems experienced with family life are extremely common. Many learners complain that their families, in particular their partners, have become frustrated with their long and regular absence from their homes, particularly over the school holiday period. A few learners believed that their partners had embarked on strategies to "frustrate them" or to seek "revenge", in response to their studies. The inability to give sufficient attention to their children is also common and another source of disquiet in the home. Siaciwena (1987) has observed that distance study puts "pressure on distance learners who have to fit in their new role of student among other occupational and social responsibilities. They therefore need preparation, encouragement, support and guidance for them to cope with the academic demands" (p.120). May (2000) also refers to this need and recommends that providers "should consider creating an enabling environment in which the demands of both studying and working can be communicated to families" (p. 5).

It is also worth noting that a large proportion of learners, 61% in 1999 and 50% in 2000, reported via end-of-course evaluation questionnaires that they had experienced a problem of either a "financial, health or personal nature" that they believed to have seriously affected their studies. In situations such as these, the more neglected range of non-academic learner support functions, such as guidance, counselling and advocacy, become imperative. Such costly yet important support is not however being provided. With mixed-mode institutions such support is often only available to traditional on-campus learners. In light of this, the national goals of equity and quality warrant particular attention. Without a comprehensive learner support plan, it is unlikely that mixed-mode institutions can claim to be making progress on the equity score with their off-campus learners. By comprehensive learner support, one means attending to both academic needs and a range of non-academic needs of the learner. Support for providing such comprehensive support is taken from Paul (1988) who states that, "it is easy to conclude from a scrutiny of research in this area that what the institution does can make very little difference to student persistence and success if it merely focuses on academic and pedagogical considerations" (p. 52). Without comprehensive learner

support then, the status of off-campus students as the poor cousins of their on-campus colleagues will continue. Is this not a form of marginalisation?

The growth of the term “mixed- mode” as a description for programmes offered through distance methods has been one way in which traditionally-contact institutions in South Africa have avoided the reduced subsidy (50%) offered by government for purely distance programmes, that is, programmes without any face-to-face contact. However, mixed-mode has usually meant that the learner support that is provided is largely academic support around the content of the course, not a comprehensive range which would include providing information, advising, guiding, counselling, developing academic skills or active forms of advocacy work on behalf of the learner. The funding policy has received strong criticism within the higher education sector for entrenching a dichotomy between “contact” and “distance” that is becoming increasingly blurred and meaningless because of technological innovation in educational delivery (SAIDE, 1999).

To return to the title of this paper, the experience on the BEd (Hons) has shown that these once-marginalised learners now within the higher education system experience considerable and debilitating difficulties. Access clearly does not equal redress! Bearing in mind Holmberg’s (cited in Jarvis, 1995) advice of developing friendly and personal relationships, and engendering conversational tones in distance education interactions, the examples of mismatched expectations and other problems referred to earlier, could instead lead to a lowering of learner motivation and to feelings of alienation on the part of learners. We may be encountering a situation where external marginalisation may be removed, but simultaneously replaced by new or remodelled marginalisation within the institution. I would like to further illustrate this contention of remodelled-marginalisation by referring to some interesting questions and behaviours presented by these learners.

The issue of the graduation ceremony was one strong theme that had emerged in all of the focus group discussions held with learners. Being the first cohort to register for the programme, these learners were extremely concerned about the graduation ceremony that would be planned for them. They wanted to be assured that their studies will culminate with a “proper university ceremony” and also made requests that it be a “grand affair”. Some learners chose to remind me that their family, friends and colleagues would be present and that they wanted to impress them. We know that the symbolic value attached to graduation is high for most learners. Was it more so for these “off-campus” learners? These learners’ on-campus predecessors had never expressed such concerns. I believe that the heightened value placed on graduation for these learners was due to a combination of factors including the mode of delivery of the programme and their new membership of a respected higher education institution.

Universities all over the world invest in developing their alumni. It can be argued that with distance learners, more conscious effort needs to be given to creating and nurturing that sense of ‘belonging to a particular learning community’. In a visit to the Open University (United Kingdom) a couple of years ago, I was impressed by the amount of attention that is paid to this aspect, in terms of developing “the OU brand” and getting learners to associate with it via newsletters, credit cards and other marketing symbols and devices. This is an area to be addressed by the University of Natal as it seeks to grow its off-campus student body.

I believe that in expressing their concerns about the graduation ceremony, learners may have been indicating their need to connect with and have a closer, more direct association with the University of Natal. More evidence for this assertion can be found in the fact that some learners choose to travel a significant distance to the university campus for their tutorials rather than attend at a venue closer to their home. A number of the Pietermaritzburg learners come onto the campus for administration matters that could be accommodated at a distance. One of the BEd (Hons) learning centres is situated in a complex above a supermarket. Learners here claim that their colleagues showed skepticism about the "University of Natal being upstairs in the Spar (supermarket) building". These were the same learners who expressed their wish that the graduation ceremony be a grand affair that would impress their family and friends. The desire to see "their lecturers" and to get proper university student cards are other common requests made by learners.

Much has been written about the sense of isolation that distance learners experience (Simpson, 2000; Bilston, 1996). Wheeler et al (1999) report on a more subtle "psychological gap" that is introduced by the separation of learners from education providers. Some of the above-mentioned concerns raised by learners may well be an effect of this more subtle form of isolation. Learners need information and preparation for the separation that is part of their study mode. The institution should be devising strategies for welcoming students, orientating them and developing their sense of belonging to the disembedded systems that they are inviting learners to.

National goals and priorities have meant that higher education institutions must transform themselves. As a traditionally face-to-face institution transforms its identity, some attention should be given to how the identities of new learners are influenced and challenged. Better and more comprehensive learner support could help with this project by aiding learners in developing a true sense of belonging to the institution and in better preparing them for their educational endeavour. To neglect this could easily lay the institution open to criticism of 'trading in an industrialised form of teaching and learning' and, more seriously, of presenting these learners with a remodelled form of marginalisation.

References

- Bertram, C. (2001) Massification with integrity?: Reflections on a mixed-mode teacher education programme. Paper presented at the Globalisation and Higher Education: Views from the South conference. 27-29 March 2001, Cape Town.
- Bilston, B. (1996) Supporting older learners in open and distance learning. In Mills, R. and Tait, A. (eds) *Supporting the learner in Open and Distance learning*. Pitman, London.
- Jarvis, P. (1995) *Adult and Continuing Education: Theory and practice*. Routledge, London.
- John, V.M. (2000) Learner support needs within the UN/SACTE distance programme: towards broader and more formalised support. Paper presented at the Second NADEOSA conference: "Southern African Models of Distance Education". 21-22 August 2000, Pretoria.
- Ministry of Education (1997) Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (1997). [Http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/white_papers/highered.html](http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/white_papers/highered.html)
- Ministry of Education (2001) National Plan for Higher Education. [Http://education.pwv.gov.za/doe_sites/Higher_Ed](http://education.pwv.gov.za/doe_sites/Higher_Ed)
- Paul, R. (1988) If student services are so important, then why are we cutting them back? In Sewart, D. and Daniel, J. *Developing distance education*. Papers submitted to the 14th ICDE world conference, Oslo, August 1988. International Council for Distance Education, Oslo.

- Randell, C. and Bitzer, E. (1998) Staff development in support of effective student learning in South African distance education. In Latchem, C. and Lockwood, F. *Staff development in open and flexible learning*. Routledge, London.
- SAIDE, 1995 Open Learning and Distance Education in South Africa, Macmillan. Report of an International Commission January - April, 1994. Macmillan, Swaziland.
- SAIDE (1999) Distance education at traditionally contact higher education institutions. Report prepared for the South African Council on Higher Education. Johannesburg.
- Siaciwena, R (1987) Towards the integration of counselling services into distance education at the University of Zambia. Proceedings of the second international workshop on counselling in distance education, Open University, United Kingdom.
- Simpson, O. (2000) *Supporting students in open and distance learning*. Kogan Page, United Kingdom.
- Thomson, C. (2000) Massification, distance learning and quality in INSET teacher education: A challenging relationship. Paper presented at the Academic Development Conference, December 2000, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
- Vinjevold, P. and Taylor, N. (1999) PEI Report: Getting Learning Right. Joint Education Trust. Johannesburg.
- Wheeler, S., Vranich, A. and Reid, F. (1999) Bridging the 'Psychological Gap' in distance learning through telematics. Poster presented at the 19th World Conference on Open and Distance Education, June 1999, Vienna, Austria.
- Wright, T. (1992) Putting independent learning in its place. In Tait, A.(ed) *Key Issues in Open Learning*. Longman, United Kingdom.

Supporting the student in new teaching and learning environments

Brian Kenworthy

Flexible Learning Centre, University of South Australia

Brian Kenworthy is Coordinator of International Projects and Project Manager, Global University Alliance in the Flexible Learning Centre at the University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, SA 5032, Australia. E-mail: brian.kenworthy@unisa.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at some of the changes being brought about by the introduction of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in higher education and the subsequent development of online education being delivered by universities, consortiums, alliances, virtual universities and the corporate world. It examines the role that student support has played, particularly for open and distance learning (ODL) in the past, and questions the ability of new providers and new learning environments to provide appropriate student supports systems in the future.

Introduction

Over recent years it has become increasingly difficult to read any commentary or report, or attend a conference on higher education, without some reference being made to the enormous changes that universities are facing. Most of these changes are based on the increasing availability and sophistication of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the way in which these technologies are impacting upon the delivery of educational programs. This has led to a situation which can best be described as the 'commodification' of higher education, with courses being packaged and sold to students, who are now being perceived as clients or customers. The Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in the UK – the Dearing Report (1997, ch.13.7) in commenting on this trend had this to say:

over the next decade, higher educational services will become an international tradable commodity within an increasingly competitive global market ... within the UK, by the end of the first decade of the next century, a 'knowledge economy' will have developed in which institutions collaborate in the production and transmission of educational programmes and learning materials on a 'make or buy' basis.

In relating this trend to open and distance learning (ODL), Tait (2000, p. 288) describes a dimension of change as a result of the ICT revolution as:

the marketisation of education, where the student in ODL, as in other educational fields, is being constructed as 'customer'. This derives from pressures on institutions both to drive their costs down and to find ways of out-competing others, while more widespread external changes in consumer culture lead to the demand for services to individuals to be speeded up. Indeed, the experience of contemporary ODL is being assessed as a guide to how education more generally will be structured in the future.

Similarly, Alan Gilbert, Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University and the prime mover for the consortium of universities known as Universitas 21, supports the notion of students as customers. In an interview on the ABC radio program Background Briefing (2000) he suggested that:

we should at least treat them as well as other enterprises treat their customers, and we don't always do that, education is a very much a supply side business, and the empowerment of customers is something that I am afraid is going to happen, whether we like it or not.

Tait's other point about the expertise and experience of ODL being utilized more widely in the educational community is supported by King (2001, p. 51):

...the infrastructure of distance education in dual mode universities-expertise in planning and scheduling, facilities for production of learning resources, experience in non-traditional delivery, appreciation of the administrative and support needs of students not on campus and the provision of systemic response to these, and professional development programs for academic staff-can be deployed to better support *all* students.

The Growth of New Services

The growth of online or virtual providers of higher education courses and services is the clearest manifestation of the changes and forecasts outlined by these commentators and many others. However the rapidly changing educational landscape makes it difficult to keep abreast of these new developments and the participants in a field, which was formerly the domain of a small number of specialist providers. These new services fit into a number of loose categories: the existing universities which have already been involved in distance education or have recently commenced such provision; the virtual universities; and the consortia or networks of education provision. A good example of the first of these categories is the Open University (UK) which according to Daniels (2000) is now "the world's largest online learning community in higher education." At an address at the Open University of Hong Kong in December 2000 Daniels further stated that "at present we have 110,000 of our degree-credit students who work with us online from home and another 105,000 elementary and secondary school teachers, also online, who are doing our Learning Schools programme." At the other end of the scale, in terms of student numbers, is the University of Southern Queensland, a dual mode university, which has been involved with traditional print based distance education for the past twenty five years, but has now entered into a contract with a corporate online provider, NextEd , to develop 'USQOnline' as its vehicle for providing online learning services to its distance education students. At the moment these students make up 75% of total enrolment and are situated in more than sixty countries. Most of the former dual mode universities in Australia, and many that were not categorized as such, are now providing courses online and attempting to capture a share of the new 'e-learning' market.

There are numerous examples of the second category, the so-called 'virtual universities.' Some of the better known are the University of Phoenix On-Line, one of the pioneers of operating online education successfully as a business; Jones International University founded in 1987 was the first accredited, fully online university; Western Governors' University is a

virtual institution that offers courses created by about forty colleges and universities from twenty states in the US, plus one in Canada; Cardean University has been established as an e-university by a US company, Unext, and adapts teaching materials from the Columbia University, Stanford University, Carnegie Mellon University and the London School of Economics; the UKe-University is an ambitious project of the UK government which has given the Higher Education Funding Council a mandate for creating an e-university with a budget of \$400 million pounds. Shares in the venture will be made available to all UK universities.

The Global University Alliance (GUA), which is a consortium of nine Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, British and United States universities, typifies the third category, consortia or networks. Together with a corporate partner, NextEd, the GUA is now online with an initial portfolio of postgraduate programs targeting major Asian markets. Others in this category include Universitas 21 with about 18 member universities located in Australia, Britain, Canada, China, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden and the United States. The prime force behind this initiative is Melbourne University, which has drawn together prestigious institutions from the countries identified above. Universitas 21 also has a corporate partner in Thompson Learning which will provide online course design, content development, testing and assessment. The Canadian Virtual University, Scottish Knowledge and the US based, DL Alliance are just a few of the other educational providers which have entered into consortia type arrangements.

The Role of Student Support

These new initiatives, although many are still in the embryonic stage, demonstrate that distance education is now certainly undergoing substantial change and that a whole new competitive industry is developing around the provision of university level programs through various forms of online delivery. This begs the question of where and how student support, an integral part of successful traditional distance education provision, fits into this new scenario. As Greville Rumble (2000, p. 217) points out “when it comes to articulating what we mean by student services, distance educators are way ahead of their colleagues in conventional universities.” He further states that:

it is surprising how little attention universities in general have paid at a theoretical level to the definition of the services they offer students. Distance education institutions tend to be the exception to this rule. Distance educators seem to have a clear understanding that student support services are integral to the overall working of their systems (Rumble, 2000, p. 232-233).

There is no doubt that the dual mode system which operated in Australian universities for a number of years, provided institutions with the basis for understanding the necessity for developing well supported student services. In order to determine how provision will be made for such services by those now entering the market, it may be useful to determine how they can they be described or categorized. Rumble (2000) analyses three different approaches to how these services can be defined by looking at the work of Reid (1995), Tait (2000) and Simpson (2000). He makes a distinction between ‘Compensatory services’, that is services which are designed to overcome students’ learning difficulties, and ‘Comprehensive services’ which are integral or built in to the program being delivered. He makes the point that:

compensatory services tend to be reactive, activated only when the institution feels they have to be. If you want to control the use made of a service, or run it down, you will make it reactive. Comprehensive services, on the other hand, tend to be more expensive because services are available even for those who do not want or need them.” (Rumble 2000, p. 223).

Tait (2000, p. 289) in a recent paper in *Open Learning*, divides the primary functions of student support into three categories:

1. cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students;
2. affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment, and enhances self esteem; and
3. systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly.

He also identifies some of the typical services that are employed to meet the demands of these functions:

1. enquiry, admission and pre-study advisory services;
2. tutoring;
3. guidance and counseling services;
4. assessment of prior learning and credit transfer;
5. study and examination centers;
6. residential schools;
7. library services;
8. individualized correspondence teaching, including in some cases continuous assessment;
9. record keeping, information management and other administrative systems;
10. differentiated services for students with special needs of one sort or another, e.g. disability, geographical remoteness, prisoners; and
11. materials which support the development of study skills, programme planning or career development (Tait 2000, p. 289-290).

It is interesting to note that all these services were, and still are, a feature of the distance education programs provided by the dual-mode universities in Australia, the former national Distance Education Centres (DECs). The one exception being ‘residential schools’, which apart from one or two institutions was never a major requirement. These services, apart from the residential component, are also currently provided, in some form or another, by Open Learning Australia to support the approximately 10,000 student enrolments it receives each year, with more and more of these services being provided online.

Student Support in a Changing Educational Environment

A number of issues or questions arise from this. First of all the application of ICTs will enable many of these services to be delivered in different ways and in some cases services may be greatly enhanced and more accessible. Both Tait (2000) and Rumble (2000) have commented upon this situation. “ICTs are also enabling more established providers to rethink and re-engineer the nature of their student services. The UK Open University is involved in just such a process as part of a strategy to position the University as a global player”

(Rumble, 2000 p. 227). The University of South Australia has also developed a range of online student services, which can be accessed by all students whether they are campus based, studying by traditional distance education or online. These services developed because of a long-standing commitment and awareness of the needs of distance education students within the university, the realisation that such services should be available to all students and a change in focus from teaching to learning.

The change in focus from teaching to learning is illustrated by new applications of technology in online learning. Here transmission models of teaching are replaced. Learner control of navigation, resource use, and interaction become central issues. An online learning environment also encompasses the administration of courses and subjects (registry functions); accessing of resources (commercial textbook suppliers, links to libraries, internet service providers); interactions within the delivery of courses and subjects (virtual tutorial groups, broadcast, one-to-one communications between students and between student and teacher); and accessing student support (learning support about and through the online environment) Nunan et al., 2000, p. 91).

However it is also fair to say that their development has also been driven by a financial imperative. In order to provide the kind of service that the 'customer' is now demanding, more efficient and effective means of delivering this service have been introduced.

Secondly, many of the institutions, corporations and consortiums identified earlier in this paper have had little or no prior experience in distance education. As Tait(2000), Rumble (2000) and many other commentators have noted, the emphasis that distance education institutions have historically placed on student support is quite an unusual feature within higher education. To a large extent "distance and open education practitioners have led the field in higher education both in terms of the student-centredness of their teaching approaches and the sophistication of the support services students receive" (King, 2001, p. 57). Given that this is the case it will be interesting to see what level and kinds of support these 'new players' into the field of ODL will provide. On the one hand the commercial nature of most of these new ventures will be 'customer focused' and the very nature of the technology should enable students better access to the services which they require. As Rumble (2000, p. 227) has pointed out:

self-help and self-service concepts have revolutionized banks, restaurants and petrol stations. Similarly, the provision of online services with access to information, advice and guidance, or to automatic enrolment and billing facilities, will enable students to do far more for themselves in the future. This hands them greater control of the relevant process by *enabling* the customer, and it also helps to reduce costs.

However will these customer-focused services include those categorized by Tait as being in the affective and cognitive areas? These are the very features, which together with better design of learning materials, enabled traditional distance education to move from a correspondence model with very high drop-out rates and a bad image to a more successful, and academically respectable alternative to traditional university study. There is a danger here that the commercial nature of many of these new ventures, even though they may employ 'customer focused' services, will lead to a situation, which actually disadvantages students.

One result is likely to be that new articulations of customer care, e.g. through Web sites supported by Call Centres, replace existing understandings of student support. Whether greater student success will be the result is not, yet, however known. One fear is that the real human cost of educational failure will be replaced by the diminished notion of the disappointed or even worse inadequate customer, returning ODL to the earlier culture of correspondence education” (Tait, 2000 p. 298).

A third issue arises from the very nature of the online teaching and learning experience. Because of the interactive capacity and the immediacy of the online environment the potential for supporting students, particularly in the ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ functions identified by Tait, would seem to be greatly enhanced. However for this to occur two conditions need to be met. First of all teachers need to learn or acquire new skills in facilitating learning online. As Salmon (2000, p. viii) points out:

Successful online learning depends on teachers and trainers acquiring new competencies, on their becoming aware of its potential and on their inspiring the learners, rather than mastering the technology.

The new roles which lecturers/tutors will be called upon to fulfill as facilitators or e-moderators are obviously crucial to the success of the online learning experience. By constructing dynamic learning activities, encouraging participation and interaction and by continually assessing students’ capabilities and involvement, they may not only provide such a learning experience, but also support students in some of the ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ areas. Secondly, the students themselves, many for the first time, are now “faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning” (McLoughlin and Marshall, 2000, p. 1). It can of course be argued that tertiary level students should already have these attributes. However those of us with experience with tertiary students can probably attest that this belief may be somewhat naïve and that learner support systems, particularly for novice users learning online, are essential for successful learning outcomes. As McLoughlin and Marshall further state:

support systems are essential for learners to engage in the processes of learning and need to be developed in response to needs. It is also imperative that a range of support systems be put in place to enable learners to become competent in learning online, and to learn to interact in a virtual environment.

On the surface this may suggest that students may require different kinds of support services than those formerly provided by ODL, this may indeed prove to be the case, but I would still maintain that the principles of independent learning, self direction and self management of time and learning activities will basically remain unchanged. The challenge for those now involved in the development of new delivery systems is to recognize, first of all the value of services which are designed to support these principles, and then determine how they can best use the technology to provide access to them.

Conclusion

The very nature of distance education is being changed and challenged by the introduction of new technologies. King (2001, p.47) has argued that “the closing years of the 20th century

saw enormous technological changes, with the potential to remove any claim to distinctive delivery by open and distance education practitioners.” The result of this has been that the traditional providers of ODL have now been joined by a host of new providers from traditional educational institutions, consortiums and corporations. Online education is now being aggressively marketed on a global basis in an attempt to capture market share of an estimated global market for e-learning of US\$300 billion which is expected to grow to US\$365 billion by 2003 (Moe and Blodgett, 2000, p. 189). Many of these new providers will develop and deliver online services for students, which attempt to replicate the ‘customer care’ services provided by other service industries. However, experience in those institutions involved in ODL over a long period of time, has shown that the kinds of support which students require go much further than technical support (an online help facility) and other administrative arrangements. There is no doubt that these other forms of support particularly related to the development of successful learning outcomes, can be provided to students online. This has been already demonstrated at a number of institutions, including the University of South Australia’s online learning environment, UniSAnet and through one of its companion services, the Learning Connection (www.unisanet.edu.au/learningconnection). The question is whether the commercial imperative of the new providers, particularly those from the corporate sector will recognize the need for such services and be in a position to provide them.

References

- Daniel, J. (2000) Inventing the online university, paper presented on the occasion of the opening of the Open University of Hong Kong Learning Centre.
- Gilbert, A. (2000) Interview on ABCs Radio national’s weekly investigative documentary: Background briefing, 16 July 2000.
- King, B. (2001) Managing the changing nature of distance and open education at institutional level, *Open Learning*, 16(1), pp. 47-60.
- McCloughlin, C. & Marshall, L. (2000) Scaffolding: A model for learner support in an online teaching environment. In A. Herrmann and M.M. Kulski (Eds), *Flexible Futures in Tertiary Teaching*. Proceedings of the 9th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, 2-4 February 2000. Perth: Curtin University of Technology.
- Moe, M. & Blodgett, H. (2000) *The Knowledge Web* (San Francisco, Merrill Lynch & Co.).
- The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) Higher education in the learning society: The Report of the national committee of inquiry into higher education in the United Kingdom [The Dearing report].
- Nunan, T., George, R. & McCausland, H. (2000) Rethinking the ways in which teaching and learning are supported: The Flexible learning centre at the University of South Australia, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 22(1), pp. 85-98.
- Rumble, G. (2000) Student support in distance education in the 21st century: Learning from service management, *Distance Education*, 21(2), pp. 216-235.
- Salmon, G. (2000) *E-moderating: The Key to teaching and learning online* (London, Kogan Page).
- Tait, A. (2000) Planning student support for open and distance learning, *Open Learning*, 15(3), pp. 287-299.

Improving interactivity online for land management distance education students

C.Kinross¹ and C. Morgan²

¹ Lecturer, Environmental Management

² Associate Dean (Undergraduate Studies and Educational Development)
University of Sydney, Orange

Abstract

Distance education holds particular potential for the area of environmental education in Australia, where students working in the land or environmental management field are often located in remote locations and may be restricted in their opportunities for interaction with staff and other students. There are limitations to this mode of teaching, however, particularly in respect of interactivity. This paper contains preliminary observations on the role of Web fora for distance education (DE) students to improve interactivity and thereby enhance student learning. We discuss the educational benefits and problems and suggest measures to overcome some of these, using as example a unit of study undertaken by DE students enrolled in the Bachelor of Land Management, Faculty of Rural Management, University of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia.

Introduction

Conventional thinking assumes that university trained environmentalists and land managers study full-time on campus due to the “hands on” nature of such programs. Such thinking confuses education, which is a process, with place. Provided the educational process is effective, and timetabling constraints are minimised, then place becomes irrelevant and the educational catchment is extended to include even those in very remote locations with unpredictable working hours. It is recognised, however that learning is best achieved in social settings and that discourse can significantly influence the level and forms of learning achieved (Vygotsky, 1978). For this reason, DE is often seen as a second-rate alternative (ABC, 2001).

Interactivity can be defined as 'the manner in which the learner dialogues with him/herself, with materials, or people during learning's mental activity' (Baker-Albaugh, 1993 p.36). Clearly it is not easy for DE students to interact with each other (Davie, 1988) and the social side of DE has been neglected, putting those students at a disadvantage (Muirhead, 2000). Milheim (1996) has reviewed the literature on interactivity within a computer-based education strategy and concludes that it is *the* most important element in instructional design. It increases the students' interest; it improves cognitive processes; and it develops group learning skills (Baker-Albaugh, 1993). More precisely, the benefits include a better understanding of different perspectives; an ability to compare progress (and mistakes) with others and with set standards; opportunities for reflection; and a deeper engagement with the topic through interaction with other learners and teachers (Gibbs, 1992; Petre *et al.*, 1998). One of the key advantages is that the student no longer feels alone, but is part of a community of students that also has problems and fears (Salmon, 2000b; Bates, 1986).

Is it possible to improve interactivity for DE students? Can we move from the individual teaching approach to a group approach, and if, so must groups always act in real-time as suggested by Sir John Daniel (1998)? Audio-conferences and residential schools can provide real-time group teaching, but are not always feasible options. What is needed is a model of group interactivity that does not require everyone to be in the same place at the same; to give that element of flexibility needed by DE students.

The Web can overcome many of these obstacles for DE students in many disciplines, including science (e.g. Gilmer, 1999), through the availability of asynchronous web fora. The educational advantages and costs through online learning have been reviewed by Laurillard (1993); McArthur and Lewis (1997); Harlamert (1998); Hughes and Hewson (1998); Petre *et al.* (1998); Stratfold (1998) and Muirhead (2000) amongst others. It has been argued (Jonassen, 1995; Papert, 1980) that computer technology has the potential to facilitate powerful learning not easily replicated in other learning environments. Many of the benefits are similar to those of interactivity itself and it is important to understand that it is the educational processes that provide the benefit, not the tools themselves (Baker-Albaugh, 1993; McArthur & Lewis, 1997). For example, a deeper approach to learning is encouraged through active participation in an appropriate context (Biggs, 1987). The actively involved student is engaged in questioning and processing to a degree rarely found in the passive learner and is expected to think critically, creatively and reflectively (Savery and Duffy, 1996).

Asynchronous Web fora can provide the convenience and flexibility for students who live in remote areas, have time constraints or are working full-time (Davie, 1988; Harlamert, 1998; Petre *et al.*, 1998; Muirhead, 2000) or due to the nature of their employment (e.g. fire-fighting) keep very unpredictable hours. They may lack the free-flowing discussion of synchronous tutorials (Hughes & Hewson, 1998) and there is evidence that students prefer immediate, or at least same day, feedback (Davie, 1988). The delay may be an advantage, however, as it provides time for reflection prior to response (Barnes, 2000) and may improve communication overall (Sherry, 1995).

While opportunities exist for educators to enhance their programs by utilising the Web, and early results are generally positive both in respect of the quantity and quality of responses in interactive fora (Muirhead, 2000), Hara and Kling (1999) caution about only examining the virtues of this medium. Their research has exposed the potential of Web delivery to frustrate students. Frustration interferes with pursuing goals (Reber, 1985), and it demotivates, thus detracting from learning (Jonassen and Grabowski, 1995).

Frustration can occur when students fall behind and may be overwhelmed with messages when re-engaging (Stratfold, 1998). Slow feedback and lack of non-verbal cues may also lead to frustration and/or hostility (Horn, 1994; Tolley, 2000). Frustration can also be caused by lack of sensitivity to the needs of learners, which may not have been taken into account in the rush to embrace the new technology (Sherry, 1995; Salmon, 2000a). Insensitivity to student diversity can also be a block to learning (Boud *et al.*, 1985). Contrasting personality types require different teaching strategies. Some prefer to learn in an independent situation and others prefer a more collaborative style (Jonassen & Grabowski, 1995) and courses such as science may need different approaches (Linich, 1999).

Successful online strategies require students to be comfortable with the technology (Bates, 1986); be prepared to take more responsibility for discovery; and be highly motivated

(Harlamert, 1998). Getting DE students to interact online is a very challenging task (Stratfold, 1998). Students that are motivated, organised and possess the ability to write effectively are more likely to take advantage of the opportunities for the interaction online courses can provide (Davie, 1988).

Students may resist new technology because it is seen as 'experimental' (Laurillard, 1993). Moreover, for it to be successful, students need to go beyond the questioning stage and to have the confidence to expose their ideas and reflections to others (Barnes, 2000), and this may be quite challenging. Of greater concern, students may perceive the knowledge to be peripheral to their main studies (Laurillard, 1993; Forsyth, 1996;). Milheim (1996) suggests that interactivity can be improved by ensuring relevance to students' needs and by offering some type of reward e.g. through credits. However, it has been shown that even where participation is graded, postings to Web fora can fade over time (Muirhead, 2000).

The arguments about improved learning outcomes using online teaching strategies have not always been validated. Some trials using these technologies have not used appropriate evaluation tools and there has been confusion between student *reactions* and learning (Alexander, 1999). Furthermore, many of the studies have contrasted face-to-face with online learning (Hughes & Hewson, 1998; Petre *et al.*, 1998) and these are unfair comparisons as DE students receive little or no face-to-face teaching, and for them Web discussions may be their *only* opportunity for social interaction.

Case study

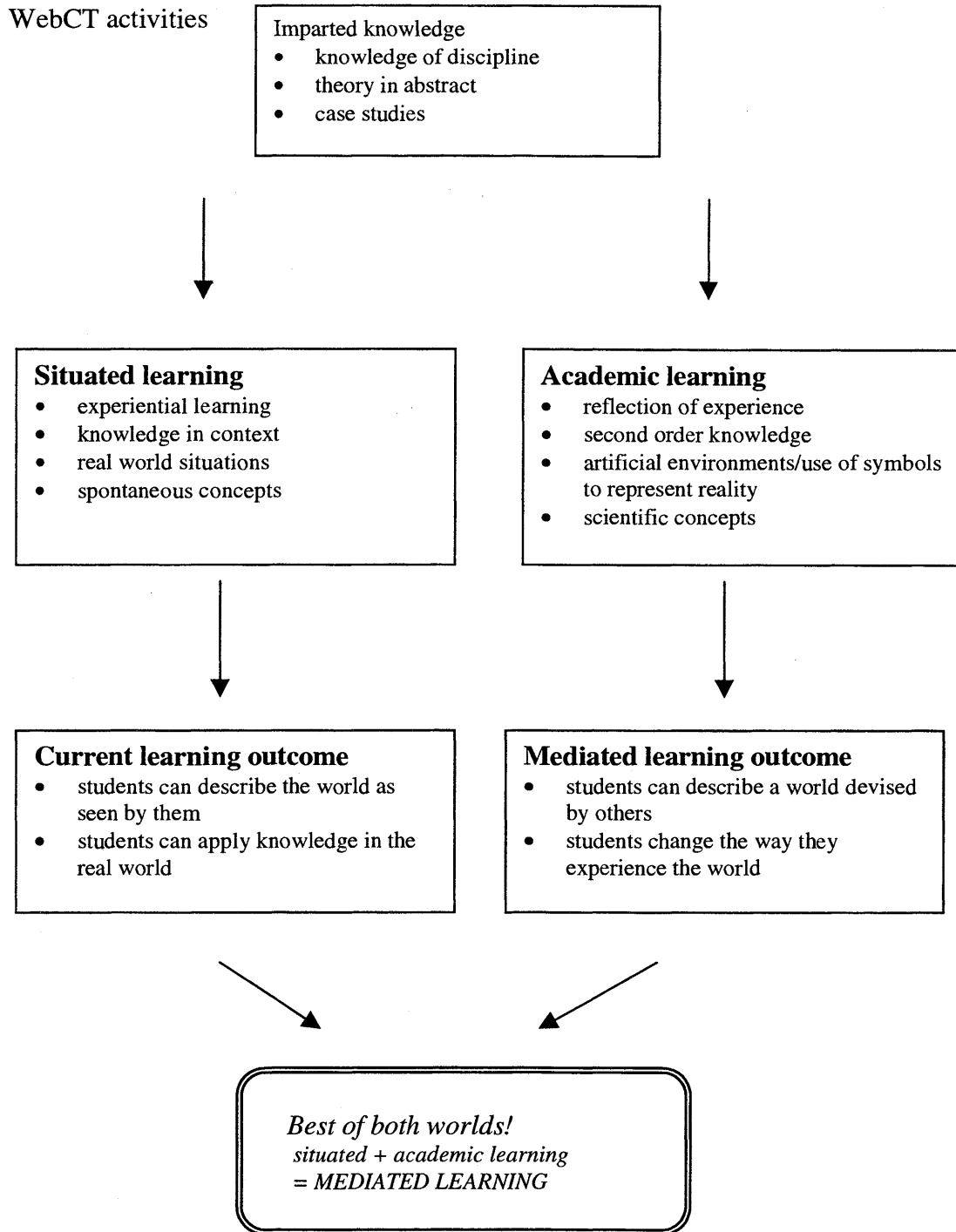
The Faculty of Rural Management, University of Sydney has gradually introduced the Web conferencing software WebCT to all DE units of study over the last few years. The unit under discussion – a third year (equivalent) unit *Land Use and Management Planning* – utilised this medium during 2000 and 2001. The numbers of students enrolled in these units were very low: 12 in 2000 and 16 in 2001. The primary teaching strategy was through printed learning guides. These permit some interaction between the student and the learning materials, but these activities are limited and probably under utilised. The unit also has an audio-conference, but no residential school (due to low enrolments).

Learning objectives

The learning objectives for this WebCT program were to reduce the feelings of isolation; to increase the amount of interactivity between students and to lift the level of academic achievement from one of *situated learning*, where learning happens in the context of a particular situation, to one of *mediated learning*, in which students go beyond specific situations and examples in order to reflect on a concept to enable them to see it in their own way, and help them 'change the way they experience the world' (Laurillard, 1993). This is illustrated in Figure 1. The strategies and pathways that presently predominate in the Faculty are shown on the left and those of a higher academic level on the right of the diagram.

The desired outcome is an amalgam of both strategies, so that students are not only capable of applying knowledge of their discipline in context, but can also go one step further and be able to abstract from the particular; so that understanding can be used in other situations i.e. to move from the particular to the general (Laurillard, 1993). This could be seen to equate with extended *abstract*, the highest level of engagement with the content in the SOLO (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcomes) learning taxonomy (Biggs, 1999).

Figure 1 Learning strategies and pathways: current and desired
 Source: adapted from Laurillard (1993)



Student preparation for Web-enhanced learning in both years included a letter which outlined the technical information needed, the program of activities and the educational benefits of the platform WebCT. These were reinforced during an audioconference held at the beginning of semester.

In both years, participation was voluntary as not all students had reliable Web access. In 2000, no assessment was undertaken, but in 2001, a system of optional credit was introduced. This was prompted by feedback received from non-participating students in 2000, and supported by Boud *et al.*'s claim that academic effort in this area should be rewarded (Boud *et al.*, 1999). Busy DE students need a very good reason to participate in optional activities (Salmon, 2000b). Boud *et al.* (1999) suggested that a credit of <20% may not be taken seriously, but when given the choice, all participating students selected a 10% weighting, probably because they were uncertain about the process and outcome. Additionally, they all elected for the tutor to undertake the assessment, rather than using self and/or peer assessment, which were offered as alternatives.

In both years, the first Web activity was an 'ice-breaker' to introduce the students to each other and to the tutor; to get the ball rolling and 'humanise the process' (Petre *et al.*, 1998). After that activities were placed on the web fortnightly. The tutor added her own comments and responses at least weekly. The first formal activity for the 2001 group was to set the assessment criteria and, after being given some ideas, the list that they produced for their 10% was:

1. Commitment to undertaking the activities in a professional manner (1%)
2. Evidence of a supportive, positive and inquiring attitude to others' comments, whatever their level of experience and expertise (3%)
3. Adherence to timelines as set, or provision of reasons for non-adherence, preferably well in advance (3%)
4. Engagement with the content in a full and focussed manner (3%)

The other activities in both years included a discussion of different land use planning approaches: a reading and comprehension exercise (which they individually selected from the readings provided); a description of the process they used to make their planning decisions (this required a combination of reading and analytical techniques); and the final (unassessed) task was to give feedback on the process. The activities were specifically designed to encourage them engage more deeply with the unit's content and to help them achieve a better outcome with their written assignment work.

Evaluation

Evaluation in both years was done by comparing this program with the Web discussion criteria of Stratfold (1998); with Salmon's (2000a) five stages of competence to online learning; with Muirhead's ideas for improving interactivity; and through student questionnaire and follow-up phone calls. A brief description of problem areas that were identified and how these were (and are still to be) rectified follows.

It was clear after the first year that considerable improvements were needed in the program. For example, one of Stratfold's (1998) criteria for Web discussions was that there should be a mechanism for guiding students through a unit e.g. discussions are closed and new ones activated. This was a bit messy in 2000, but the mechanisms tightened in 2001 with the introduction of assessment (and its concomitant time-lines). The discussion certainly proceeded at a more orderly pace and in a more focussed manner. There were also fewer problems with frustration at slow responses than in the previous year.

Interaction and collaboration with other people were inconsistent in both years. The depth of interaction increased in 2001 with the students being assessed on their engagement with the content. The students generally gave considerable thought to their responses and backed their statements up with evidence from their reading, but the level of participation did not increase. This may have been an unexpected outcome of the introduction of assessment, as those students who selected not to be assessed, did not join in the discussions at all, after they had made that decision. The reason for this has not yet been evaluated, but I suspect summative assessment may have given the activities a mantle of formality, which was not as obvious in the previous year. This can be addressed by providing a separate forum for non-assessable, and thereby less formal, discussion. The collaboration aspect has also been addressed through the introduction of a peer-mentoring program in future years.

The main gaps in our Web program, when evaluated against Salmon's (2000a) five stages of competence in online learning, were the lack of hands-on-tuition, lack of technical support after hours, activities not being completed synchronously due to the Faculty's flexible timetable for unit completion. Students were also not given much opportunity for leadership and external links were not provided. Some of these were remedied in 2001 e.g. the tasks were generally completed synchronously, but some problems were not tackled, as they were not considered appropriate at this time.

After consideration of Muirhead's (2000) ideas for improving interactivity, some effort was made to improve this aspect in 2001. The questions were made more intellectually demanding, whilst trying to still be inclusive of all students. The tutor was also more visibly responsive and informative and provided more student-centred activities. She did not try and make students accountable for weekly discussions, however, as this would have resulted in excess workload for the students.

Student evaluation was also undertaken (Table 1), although in both years the response was very low: four in 2000 and three in 2001 (25%). Despite this, it is clear that, for those who did respond, the experience was a positive one. They were generally comfortable with the technology and not intimidated by the process. There was a strong indication that the tutor's contributions were important. Many commented that, once they had overcome the initial technical hurdles, they found it helpful and they particularly liked to see viewpoints and ideas from students from different geographic regions and diverse backgrounds. Three of the students who were formally assessed in 2001 commented on the fact that the activities enhanced their learning and opened their mind to other aspects of the study that they may not have discovered otherwise.

Table 1 Responses to WebCT evaluation questionnaire
Responses are on a 5 point scale: 1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree

Questions	Mean	Responses	Range
Access made to WebCT was every (no. of weeks)	1.43	7	1-2 wk
Access was made from home (h) or work (w)	5h 2w	7	NA
Enjoyed using technology	1.29	7	1-3
Level of support suitable	2.00	6	1-3
Enjoyed contact with other students	1.83	6	1-3
Found messages from tutor useful and motivating	1.33	6	1-3
Found messages from other students useful and motivating	2.00	6	1-3
Was embarrassed or nervous to post messages	4.17	6	3-5

Felt WebCT gave me a sense of continuity	2.00	6	1-3
Felt WebCT made the unit more enjoyable	2.00	6	1-3
Believe WebCT helped me through unit (2001 only)	2.00	3	2-2
Would like to see WebCT extended into more units	1.43	7	1-2
Would like to see WebCT extended into administration	1.43	7	1-2

Students who participated in the program generally obtained higher grades than non-participants did. However, little confidence can be put into this evidence due to the tiny sample, and the probability of confounding variables e.g. the participants may have been better motivated and had a deeper approach to learning prior to commencement of the unit, so their participation might have made little difference to their final outcome.

Recommendations for improving interactivity

Web activities need to be carefully planned. Problems need to be identified and remedies sought. Students need plenty of advance warning and adequate induction. Learning objectives should be identified as a first step. These should be based on both content (e.g. planning theory) and process (e.g. group learning, peer mentoring) and be congruent with the learning objectives for the unit as a whole. Forms of interaction should be defined to achieve the unit's aims (Laurillard, 1993).

Low participation rates

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties in raising active participation rates, remedial strategies include lifting the standard of the fora themselves; using assessment as a means of encouragement; and providing a diversity of activities. In respect of the Web fora, Tolley (2000) suggests that it is important to ensure that no-one is excluded by the level (or language) of the debate and to keep the dialogue flowing, even if it is only with one student. Tutors can also find out who is reading, but not posting, and solicit responses directly from those students (e.g. by private email), whilst being aware that there is some educational benefit for those who only participate by reading others' comments (Farrell, 2001).

Fora could be improved by making them more student-centred, intellectually demanding and relevant (Boorsook & Higginbotham-Wheat, 1991), without being too onerous. The facilitator needs to be a 'role model' and encourage discussion (Davie, 1988). He or she needs to go beyond summarising content of messages, but should relate them to the unit's content: theory and practice (Salmon, 2000b). Wider use should be made of the Web's resources (Oliver *et al.*, 1999) and of WebCT tools, such as the virtual whiteboard and private fora for groupwork and peer-mentoring.

In the unit discussed, the main inducement, apart from offering credit, was to try and persuade the students that it was not additional workload, but would complement and raise the standard of their assignment work, but this did not seem to be particularly effective. Next year, students will be given the option: assessable participation or completion of an alternative task of equivalent workload offline. Although this strategy could be seen as introducing an undesirable compliance tool (Boud *et al.*, 1999), and may lead to complications if the technology fails to provide continuity, it is likely to be acceptable to DE

students, many of whom have adapted to an assignment-driven curriculum as a survival mechanism.

In 2002, the assessment will be similar to 2001, with refinements. Early activities will be designed to ensure students are comfortable with the medium, followed by more sophisticated, content-related tasks mid-semester, leading to the later stages where a constructivist approach to learning should be adopted. This should benefit our students due to their considerable prior learning, an understanding of which is a requirement for constructing new meaning (Salmon, 2000b). In addition, better feedback will be given to the students as they progress through each milestone (Farrell, 2001).

The students will set some of the marking criteria, but some will be non-negotiable to ensure that they are congruent with the unit learning objectives and SOLO principles, and to aid the move from situated to mediated learning. Self-assessment, with 'informed opinion from peers' will be trialed, as recommended by Boud *et al.* (1999) to develop autonomous learning skills. Although there are concerns over self-assessment as mature age students sometimes assess themselves at a lower level than is justified (pers. obs.), if it stressed that it is the level of *improvement* in the approach to learning that is important, and is backed up by anonymous peer review, it should be acceptable.

The other way to improve interactivity is to diversify the types of activities planned. Many suggestions are available in the literature e.g. Farrell (2001); Muirhead (2000). Problem-solving workshops could be very useful, particularly where real life simulations were used (Oliver *et al.*, 1999) as part of the transition from situated to mediated learning. These should be considered once the culture of online learning is more widespread.

Another option is that of peer mentoring, which seems to offer the best of the benefits of online learning – interactivity as well as the valuable tool of mentoring (Topping, 1996). The learning pairs would not work in total isolation from the rest of the class, but would report back their findings at regular intervals, so that all students benefit. This would be based on problem-solving and 'structured controversy' (Johnson & Johnson, 1988) to improve critical thinking skills, with pairs working on a particular problem or issue together, then reporting back to the main group.

Future evaluation

Incorporation of evaluations of these changes to teaching strategy is critical if the Faculty aims to improve the quality of teaching (Milheim, 1996). The tutor should therefore:

- monitor and analyse participation using tracking and other tools as described by Davie (1988); Muirhead (2000) and Salmon (2000b)
- participate in WebCT discussion with colleagues to share new ideas and to seek changes to teaching strategies
- compare performance of students (grades, self and peer assessment output) at various levels of participation to identify trends
- use self-reporting questionnaires and online discussion of the Web program to gain insight into how the process can be improved and aid student understanding of the process of learning online (Salmon, 2000b).

Conclusion

Opportunities for practising land managers to participate in high quality education programs are improving, as these programs become widespread. Evolving delivery technologies are enabling the potential student, regardless of location, age, work or domestic commitments to participate in formal courses. As the aim is to encourage students to move to mediated learning, without losing their ability to achieve situated learning, then participation in computer-based discussion groups and learning partners can provide useful tools.

Whilst there may be evidence that improvements in student learning can be achieved, will the students perceive the benefits in time to take advantage of them in a semester? We should be optimistic and anticipate that, as Stratfold (1998) suggests, students will use this technology when they perceive the benefits: improved learning, flexibility, contact with peers and tutors, and access to the Web resources. Once there is institution-wide acceptance, there is also a stronger likelihood of dialogue taking place and this may lead to an increase in student numbers, which will further enhance interactivity (Daniel, 1997). Many challenges remain: for example the timing of the delivery needs to become more flexible – unconstrained by administrative boundaries and more student-centred. However, even within the current constraints, if adequate planning is undertaken and sufficient attention given to improving student learning and interaction, we are confident that the medium can bring immense benefits to both the institution and to its teachers and students.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the students enrolled in the unit *Land Use and Management Planning* in 2000-2001 for the efforts to grapple with the new technology; to Sally Brownlow, WebCT Coordinator, for undertaking the student evaluation of the Unit fora; to Michael Halliwell and the class of 2000 enrolled in the Graduate Certificate of Education (Higher Education) for their support and ideas – particularly in respect of marking criteria; and to our colleague, Tony McKenzie, for his peer review and comments.

References

- ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) Radio National, 2001. *The Digital Degree*, The Big Idea. 3 June 2001. Part one: Permanent education has arrived (Australia, ABC).
- ALEXANDER, S. (1999) An evaluation of innovative projects involving communication and information technology in higher education, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(2), pp. 173-183.
- BAKER-ALBAUGH, P.R. (1993) What we see is not what we get, *Journal of Instruction Delivery Systems*, 7(3), pp. 36-39.
- BATES, T. (1986) *Computer Assisted Learning or Communications: Which Way for Information Technology in Distance Education?* Information Technology Paper No. 250 (Bletchley, Bucks, Institute of Educational Technology, Open University).
- BIGGS, J.B. (1987) *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying* (Melbourne, Australian Council for Education Research).
- BIGGS, J. (1999) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press).

- BOORSOOK, T.K. & HIGGINBOTHAM-WHEAT, N. (1991) Interactivity: what is it and what can it do for computer-based instruction? *Educational Technology*, 31(10), pp. 11-17.
- BOUD, D., COHEN, R. & SAMPSON, J. (1999) Peer learning and assessment, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 24(4), pp. 413-426.
- BOUD, D., KEOGH, R. & WALKER, D. (1985) Promoting reflection in learning: a model, in: D. Boud, R. Keogh & D. Walker (Eds) *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning* (London, Kogan).
- DANIEL, J.S. (1997) Why universities need technology strategies, *Change*, 29(4), pp. 1-7.
- DANIEL, J. (1998) Can you get my hard nose in focus? Universities, mass education and appropriate technology, in: M. Eisenstadt & T. Vincent (Eds) *The Knowledge Web* (London, Kogan Page).
- DAVIE, L.E. (1988) Facilitating adult learning through computer-mediated distance education, *Journal of Distance Education*, III(2), pp.55-69
- FORSYTH, I. (1996) *Teaching and Learning Materials and the Internet* (London, Kogan Page).
- GIBBS, G. (1992) *Improving the Quality of Student Learning* (Bristol, Technical and Educational Services Ltd.).
- GILMER, P. (1999) Developing a discourse community: teaching biochemistry using the World Wide Web, in: J.A. Chambers, Ed. (Ed) *Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning* (Jacksonville, Florida Community College, Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning).
- HARA, N. AND KLING, R. (1999) Students' frustrations with a web-based distance education course, *First Monday*, 4(12), Available online at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue4_12/hara/index.html.
- HARLAMERT, J.A. (1998) Effect of distance education on student learning methodologies, *Journal of Instruction Delivery Systems*, 12(4), pp. 6-8.
- HORN, D. (1994) Distance education: is interactivity compromised, *Emerging Technologies*, October 1994.
- HUGHES, C. & HEWSON, L. (1998) Online interactions: developing a neglected aspect of the virtual classroom, *Educational Technology*, July-August, pp. 48-55.
- JOHNSON, D.W. & JOHNSON, R.T. (1988) Critical thinking through structured controversy, *Educational leadership*, 46, pp. 58-64.
- JONASSEN, D.H. (1995) Computers as cognitive tools: learning with technology, not learning from technology, *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 6(2), pp. 40-73.
- JONASSEN, D.H. & GRABOWSKI, B.L. (1995) *Handbook of Individual Differences, Learning and Instruction* (Hillsdale, New Jersey, Erlbaum).
- LAURILLARD, D. (1993) *Rethinking University Teaching - A Framework for the Effective Use of Educational Technology* (London, Routledge).
- LINICH, M. (1999) Beyond constructivism in the life sciences, in: J.A. Chambers, (Ed) *Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning* (Jacksonville, Florida Community College, Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning).
- MCARTHUR, D. & LEWIS, M. (1997) *Untangling the Web: Applications of the Internet and Other Information Technologies to Higher Education* (Santa Monica, CA., Rand Corp., Inst. on Education and Training).
- MILHEIM, W.D. (1996) Interactivity and computer-based instruction, *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 24(3), pp. 225-233.
- MUIRHEAD, B.(moderator) (2000) Enhancing social interaction in computer-mediated distance education, *International Forum of Educational Technology and Society: Formal*

Discussion Initiation, Available online at

http://ifets.ieee.org/discussions/discuss_sept2000.html.

OLIVER, R., OMARI, A. & STONEY, S. (1999) Collaborative learning on the World Wide Web, in: J.A. Chambers, Ed. (Ed) *Selected Papers from the 10th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning* (Jacksonville, Florida Community College, Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning).

PAPERT, S. (1980) *Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas* (New York, Basic Books).

PETRE, M., CARSWELL, L., PRICE, B. & THOMAS, P. (1998) Innovations in large-scale supported distance teaching: transformation for the Internet, not just translation, in: M. Eisenstadt & T. Vincent (Eds) *The Knowledge Web* (London, Kogan Page).

REBER, A. (1985) *Penguin Dictionary of Psychology* (London, Penguin).

SALMON, G.K. (2000a) Driving across stepping stones, in: M. Asensio, J. Foster, V. Hodgson & D. & McConnell (Eds) *Networked Learning 2000. Innovative Approaches to Lifelong Learning and Higher Education through the Internet*. (Lancaster, UK., Lancaster University).

SALMON, G.K. (2000b) *E-moderating: the Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (London, Kogan Page).

SHERRY, L. (1995) Issues in distance learning, *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 1(4), pp. 337-365.

SAVERY, J.R. AND DUFFY, T.M. (1996) Problem based learning: An instructional model and its constructivist framework, in B.G. Wilson (Ed.) *Constructivist learning environments: Case studies in instructional design* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Educational Technology Publications).

STRATFOLD, M. (1998) Promoting learner dialogues on the Web, in: M. Eisenstadt & T. Vincent (Eds) *The Knowledge Web* (London, Kogan Page).

TOPPING, K.J. (1996) The effectiveness of peer tutoring in further and higher education: a typology and review of the literature, *Higher Education*, 32, pp. 321-345.

VYGOTSKY, L. (1978) *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press).

Slowing the revolving door: providing academic support for distance education learners

**Denise Kirkpatrick
Teaching and Learning Centre
University of New England
New South Wales
Australia**

It has been argued that good distance learning programs have to deliver more services to the student than the traditional program, particularly in the area of administrative and student services (Bothel, 2001). The provision of support to students who attend on-campus is relatively straightforward but it is more problematic to conceive of the range of services that are needed by distance learners and ways of providing such services in affordable and accessible ways. How are universities providing for the academic needs of students studying in distance education mode? The increasing numbers of universities adopting some degree of distance education provision to support more open access there is a need to ensure that the open door does not become a revolving door for students.

Academic Support in Distance Education

There is little literature either in the field of distance education or the emerging flexible delivery field that explicitly addresses the specific academic support needs of students studying externally, or the approaches and programs that could provide appropriate support for these students. A review of articles published in the *American Review of Distance Education* (Koble & Bunker 1997) showed that only three published articles (13%) focused on student administration procedures and student support systems such as tutoring, counselling and advising. The authors suggested that while the traditions of institutions dedicated solely to distance education showed well developed student support systems, the dual mode universities have not yet developed specific support systems to accommodate the distance learners in their population.

The expansion of the use of new technologies to provide distance education online has created new opportunities to provide students with access to support services. There is an emerging body of literature identifying the need for services in these contexts that address library and information resource provision (Aoki & Pogroszewski 1998; Bothel 2001; Gubbins 1998) and explicate the technology infrastructure support required for effective online delivery (The Advisory Committee for Online Learning, 2000). However, at this stage there is little describing or evaluating the range and means of provision of student support. This applies to the provision of learning and study skills support for conventional distance education learners and for students in online learning environments. The expansion of online teaching and learning has been accompanied by a developing interest in ways in which academic skills programs may be delivered online (Robbins 1999). Indeed, it may be that the growth of online provision will encourage attention to the development of support services for off-campus students.

Wholly distance education institutions have attended more seriously to the provision of student support services than have dual-mode institutions, where attention has been focused on providing support for students studying on-campus - the students we see. Richardson (2000) claims that the dual mode approach is disadvantaged because distance education students are in the minority across the whole higher education system, and in individual institutions. In Australia, the proportion of enrolled students studying flexibly is increasing, and in a number of Australian dual-mode institutions, students studying 'externally' represent the majority of enrolments at least in student numbers (eg at UNE 70% of enrolled students are studying externally and the proportion is similar at Charles Sturt University). When a proportion of this nature of the student body is studying off-campus it is essential that institutions provide adequate and appropriate support. As universities make increasing use of the internet to offer courses in more flexible ways there is a growing need to consider the nature and scope of academic support services that are available to support off-campus learners.

Needs of Distance Education Students

Distance education institutions are concerned at the comparatively high attrition rate of students who study externally. The reasons for this attrition are varied, but include inappropriate subject selection, inadequate academic preparation, economic hardship, ineffective time management strategies, unrealistic expectations, and external pressures. Whatever the reason, the effect of such attrition is undesirable from the perspective of students and institutions. Not only should academic support services enhance students' experience of studying by distance education they should assist students in staying on.

In general Australian students who study by distance education are not school leavers or young adults, rather they are older and bring with them a range of life experiences which do not necessarily include recent successful formal, education experience. These students are frequently less well prepared for university than their counterparts in on-campus institutions. In addition, they normally have a high level of commitment to activities other than study, hence there is competition for their time and attention. They may be geographically isolated, and experience restricted access to resources. Layered on this are the particular demands of distance education study- the dependence on self-motivation and self-management, limited interaction with teachers and colleagues, less structured educational program (no tutorial, lecture times etc), dependence on text based instruction, lack of immediate peer support and restricted access to support services. This creates an especially demanding educational context in which university students are tackling not only the demands of study but the additional challenges presented by the mode of study.

Academic Support Provision

On-campus teaching institutions generally have well developed student support structures and services. In this paper I am concerned with those services that assist students in developing and improving academic skills, those activities commonly described as learning and study skills. The traditional repertoire of study skills such as note making, essay writing, exam skills, and information retrieval has expanded to include notions of academic literacies and information literacies encompassing the range of information sources which students will encounter. As previously mentioned, conventional universities generally have well established services for face-to-face students, and those universities whose primary business

is distance learning have developed appropriate mechanisms for assisting their students. How can dual-mode institutions provide on- and off-campus students effective and accessible academic skills programs and support? Dealing with two different groups of students imposes significant economic and resource demands and this presents significant challenges in the increasingly restricted economic conditions of Australian higher education. Strategies which rely solely on face-to-face meetings or workshops are unrealistic and inappropriate. Academic skills delivery supported by basic technologies such as phone and fax are not always convenient for students who cannot make use of these at the times that they are available. Additionally while they are appropriate technologies for dealing with specific one-to-one requests, these approaches perpetuate a model of academic support which is increasingly difficult to sustain. Not only are there obvious associated costs (such as call costs and fax paper) but the provision of academic support on an extensive one-to-one basis is expensive and inefficient. Such individual consultations may provide students with assistance with an immediate problem but do little to assist students in developing transferable skills or the opportunity to learn from others. While there is a place for such assistance, sustainable academic support needs to consider the provision of opportunities to develop relevant academic skills and opportunities to seek assistance and feedback.

The expansion of the use of the internet to provide education has presented a viable environment for offering such support to students who cannot attend on-campus. Online provision of services can take advantage of asynchronous communication, facilitating interaction across time zones and convenient to the working lives of many distance education students. Interaction can occur between students and learning skills advisors, and among groups of students. Provision of essential information online can alleviate the inconvenience and costs associated with extended, long distance telephone queries, and make support available to students outside of regular office hours. The challenge is to provide access to a support service that is equitable and comparable to the range of services available to on-campus students.

The University of New England Response

The work of the Academic Skills Office at the University of New England, like its equivalents in other Australian universities, has centred around individual face-to-face consultation on essay drafts, examination skills and other study issues. It also offers group sessions on essay and report writing; assignment skills, exam technique and other aspects of academic literacy. These embodied support practices have been supported with a range of resource materials predominantly print-based but recently using CDROM and online, web-based resources. However, as a dual mode university with approximately 70% of our enrolments in distance education mode this approach was scarcely equitable, meeting only a limited range of the academic support needs of distance education students.

The Academic Skills Office provides a range of support services for students- it has well developed mechanisms and infrastructure for provision of academic skills support for on-campus students but had offered less support targeted at the needs and contexts of students studying by distance education. In the last few years it has given greater attention to developing ways of providing support for distance education students especially those who are geographically distributed - the aim has been to maintain the flexibility afforded by distance education study, providing services in accessible ways.

As a dual-mode university, a feature of UNE's distance education approach has been the use of residential schools where as a normal part of their enrolment in distance education subjects/courses students attend on-campus sessions. These are usually held on the main university campus but may be located at specialist sites. Students can access counselling services and learning and study skills workshops or one to one consultations while on campus for these schools. However, in recent years residential schools are no longer an integral part of each subject and are no longer part of all subjects. Consequently, there has been a need to develop other means of providing learning skills and study support to distance education students.

Prospective Students' Site

In order to address some of the issues associated with high levels of attrition in the early stages of enrolment and inadequate student understanding of distance education study, UNE has developed an extensive array of information for prospective students. A central part of this is a website presenting course information, information about the university and what it means to be a distance education student- the challenges, expectations and commitment required. It also provides basic information about the nature of support available at the university, short comments from current students, self-assessment resources and techniques, and basic study skills. This is supported by print resource materials providing similar information, which are mailed to students who seek enrolment information from the university, overcoming issues associated with student access to the internet.

tUNEup: A University Preparation Program

The mission of UNE is concerned with aspects of openness. The UNE offers flexible and open access to students from diverse backgrounds providing increased opportunity to enter higher education. UNE has significantly higher percentages of students from rural and isolated backgrounds, and students classified as of low socioeconomic status, than the national average. Many such students leave school without the educational and cultural 'capital' taken for granted in traditional university entrance requirements.

tUNEup is a university preparation course developed to support students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds who are under-prepared for university study. For mature aged students in many Australian rural areas, the extensive distance education offerings of UNE have long provided their only means of attaining a university qualification. The Schools Recommendation Admission Scheme is a system that has provided an avenue whereby school leavers from rural and/or disadvantaged backgrounds can enter university. This admission procedure requires participating schools to give an independent assessment of students in particular subject areas and general potential for success on personal grounds such as persistence, motivation and capacity for independent work. This provides an alternate mechanism of university entry for a number of students who have lower than otherwise acceptable official entrance scores. These students, and also those entering university as mature age students beginning tertiary study after a long absence from the education system, are the primary targets of tUNEup.

tUNEup comprises five sections which are available separately or as a package:
Study Skills, Academic Writing, Library and Information Technology Skills and Basic

Mathematics and Statistics.

- The Study Skills section covers effective study techniques, listening and notetaking, reading strategies, time management, improving concentration and memory and managing exam anxiety.
- Academic Writing covers writing conventions, writing for assessment including exams, essay writing including sentence and paragraph construction, report writing and referencing.
- Library and Information Technology Skills assist students in developing the skills they need to access UNE online, use the library's electronic resources, indexes and abstracts, conduct advanced online searches, and use Netscape and the World Wide Web
- Basic Mathematics and Statistics has been designed to assist students to develop an understanding of their readiness to cope with the mathematical components of university courses in the discipline areas of health, economics, psychology and education by identifying their strengths and weaknesses and possible areas of need. It contains a self remediation section which is clearly set out for the purpose of self-help.
- tUNEup Extra, addresses the needs of NESB and international students who need in-depth learning assistance cognisant of the need for a language skills-based approach focussing on common problems for non-native speakers. There is also a section introducing international students to the intellectual culture of universities in English speaking countries and the associated cross-cultural issues, and to UNE in particular.

These modules are available on CD ROM and modified versions of the Study Skills and Academic Writing topics are also available to students on audio cassette tape.

Virtual Careers Fair

The University developed a virtual careers fair to provide distance education students with access to career related information. As a small regional university UNE experienced difficulty attracting employers to a traditional careers fair, and was challenged to provide careers related services to students who are unable to attend prospective employer's information sessions, or university or industry expos because of financial, distance or time constraints. The Virtual Careers Fair provides access to employment information, career options, access to marketing of graduate programs by companies, for regional and remote students. Presented online the 10 day Virtual Careers Fair involves national employers, online chat rooms, 24 hour access to employer searches, links to applications and company websites, virtual interview game to develop interview skills and provide feedback and coaching.

Graduate Advisors and Others

The Teaching and Learning Centre supports alumni who register to act as graduate advisors to current students who live in their area. In this role they provide support and assistance with general study issues to any student who live close by and seek their assistance.

In addition to the services described above the University continues to provide on-campus support to distance education students via telephone, fax and email. Workshops and individual consultations are provided during the residential school periods when students are on-campus. The residential school period also provides an opportunity for the presentation of in-context academic skills sessions presented by lecturers and staff of the Academic Skills

Office. This is enhanced through the distribution of a variety of print resources, some distributed automatically with course materials and others available on request. Staff of the Academic Skills Office also provide on-site learning skills instruction for students in regional access centres and study centres located in capital cities where large numbers of students are located.

Universities offering distance education programs and increasingly all universities offering programs in flexible delivery mode (whatever that may mean) have a responsibility to recognise the needs of these learners and provide appropriate support services in accessible ways. Avoid the open door of access to higher education becoming a revolving door. Universities need to affirm their commitment to student welfare as part of their central concern. Shift the focus away from identifying student with difficulties who need help to optimising the experience of all students. Regardless of the institutional philosophy of academic support, distance education students should be provided with some form of accessible, relevant academic support targeted at the needs of students studying via distance education.

References

- Advisory Committee for Online Learning, (2000) *The e-learning e-volution in Schools and Colleges: A Pan-Canadian Challenge*. Ottawa: Industry Canada.
- Aoki, K. and Pogroszewski (1998) *Virtual university reference model: A guide to delivering education and support services to the distance learner*. Fall, vol 1, 3.
<http://westga.edu/~distance/aoki/fa1141/bothe141.htm> [accessed June 4 2001]
- Bothel, R. (2001) *Bringing it all together*.
<http://westiza.edu/~distance/oidla/spriniz4libothel4t.html> [accessed June 4 2001]
- Koble, M. A. and Bunker, E. L. (1997) 'Trends in research and practice: An examination of The American Journal of Distance Education 1987 – 1991'. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 11 (2): 19 -3 8.
- Richardson, J. T. E. (2000) *Researching Student Learning: Approaches to Studying in Campus Based and Distance Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Robbins, J. (1999) *Online delivery of academic skills: Feasible or feckless?* Paper presented at Language and Learning: The learning dimensions of our work. Monash University, November 1999.

The Tugela Terry Tango: Reflections on an education for democracy project in Kwazulu-Natal

**Sandra Land
Centre for Adult Education
University of Natal**

In their description of the educational aspect of the struggle for democracy in Southern Africa Walters and Watters note the informal and non-formal education integral to the alliances and democratic movements that changed our country and others in sub-Saharan Africa. They refer to the 'rich learning' associated with social and political action, but go on to deplore subsequent wars, political turmoil, and poverty in the region which have dissipated the abundant potential of the region, so that what continues is the struggle to survive in often desperate conditions. (Walters and Watters, 2001, p110)

They also point out that even in the relative calm of South Africa, the development of explicit policies for adult education in South Africa have not resulted in the advent of programmes that prepare people to fulfil their role as citizens of a democratic society (Walters and Watters 2001, p107). In the current post-reform climate, adult education programmes with political awareness as a priority have largely ceased to exist, and in their stead have appeared programmes whose aim is equip people with strictly functional literacy skills. There is very little endeavour to follow the political struggle with education for what to do after the battle is won.

At the Centre for Adult Education¹, we believe that education for democracy should be included in adult education programmes because, for many people in South Africa, the change from apartheid to the present democratic dispensation continues to mean very little. Constitutional rights are hollow for many of our people who do not know that they have these rights, or how to exercise them, or do not understand the duties that naturally accompany them. Therefore we believe that it is appropriate for all South African adult education organisations to offer their learners opportunities to learn how to access their rights, and to discover what resources exist to support their exercising of these rights, how people should be served by representative political systems, what is meant by accountability and transparency, and what ordinary people have to do in order to support a democratic society.

The Human Rights, Development and Democracy project

The HRDD project is based on the principles expressed in Mezirow's transformation theory. This a basically constructivist theory of adult learning, which postulates that the way people interpret their experience depends very largely on ways of understanding the world that are learnt through socialisation processes very early in life. These belief systems and habitual expectations may not be effective in serving people for what is required of them in the changing contexts they experience in their adult lives, but people have a strong tendency to interpret experiences in ways that fit their established understanding of their world, and to

¹Hereafter referred to as the Centre

avoid having this understanding challenged. Dysfunctional ways of understanding may arise from life experiences that include 'distorted sociolinguistic premises involving specific ideologies, prescribed norms and roles' (Mezirow, 1991 p144). In reflecting on new experiences, particularly ones that have involved solving particular dilemmas or problems, people may discover that their habitual ways of understanding are unjustified, and they may be forced into uncomfortable but possibly life-changing reconstruction of these 'meaning perspectives' (Mezirow, 1991 p192).

It is not difficult to argue that many rural impoverished South Africans who have lived all their lives in conditions of political and economic oppression stand to gain from learning experiences that offer them opportunities of reviewing and possibly reconstructing their habitual ways of seeing themselves in relation to the world.

There is are very few reports of development projects in Africa which aim to enable people to begin to fulfil their potential role in the societies in which they live. One such is from the Republic of Guinea, described by Ibrahima Barry. Her account is of a women's group that has faced formidable odds and shown considerable resilience in recovering from setbacks. The salient characteristic of this group appears to be that their endeavours were primarily the result of their own initiative as opposed to the more usual pattern of reported projects where participants engage in activities suggested by outside agencies (Barry, 2000).

Barry's observation that after three decades of authoritarian rule in the Republic of Guinea, the people of the country had become 'totally passive' (Barry 2000 p197), has clear resonance with the South African context. Barry notes that development initiatives resulting from endeavours of ordinary citizens of Guinea were rare. Similarly, there are few development projects that are the result of the initiative of ordinary people in South Africa. Projects are usually the result of initiation external to the communities in which they run, although there are increasing attempts to involve members of participating local communities at every level of planning and implementation. The Human Rights, Development (and Democracy) project fits this description.

The Human Rights, Development (and Democracy) (HRDD) project is a co-operative initiative of Tembaletu Community Education Centre, a non-governmental organisation which offers adult basic education (ABE) classes at satellite centres in six rural centres scattered through the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, and the Centre for Adult Education, which is part of the University of Natal. The components of this project are:

- the inclusion of a human rights / democracy component in community adult basic education classes, in addition to mother tongue literacy (in Zulu), basic English and numeracy;
- the admission of community ABE teachers to an undergraduate level university course in community education. Since they did not have the school leaving certificate required for university entrance their admission required special arrangements;
- the setting up and initial funding of community projects of participants' own choice with the aim of providing practical opportunities for exercising newly gained rights, accessing resources and practising self directed community development;
- the production of informal adult education material based on the real experiences in the running of the project, and published in the Centre's weekly publication, *Learn with Echo* a weekly adult basic education newspaper supplement.

The partners

The partners in this Human Rights Development and Democracy (HRDD) project fall into four distinct groups:

- the community participants, who are ordinary people living in relatively poor conditions in the six rural areas where the project is operating,
- the facilitators, or ABE teachers, themselves members of the communities in which they teach,
- the two co-operating organisations working to implement the project, in this case, Tembaletu, a non-governmental organisation in Pietermaritzburg, which runs the rural centres and manages the activities engaged in at these centres, and the Centre for Adult Education, whose main role is to provide formative continuous evaluation, and
- the Embassy of Finland, who fund the project.

The project is running in six rural areas scattered through the midlands in KwaZulu-Natal. One of these is a place called Tugela Ferry, about two hours' travel from Pietermaritzburg. This is probably where the project is the most desperately needed, and also undoubtedly where it is has been the least successful. Tugela Ferry is a very large, almost completely undeveloped and barren area used by various political leaders over the last hundred and fifty years as a sort of dumping ground for displaced groups of people and refugees. It is too barren to support more than a very light populace, and has become increasingly notorious for political violence as the people who have found themselves living there compete for its very scarce resources.

The reason I have called this paper *The Tugela Ferry Tango* is that it is very clear that the project develops in a continually evolving pattern of moves made by project partners in relation to one another, at times oppositional (where we have trod heavily on each others' toes), and at others with inspired synchronisation. Just as participants in a tango are constrained by the rhythm of the music to which they dance, we must temper our ideas and execute our moves within the physical and political constraints and limits implicit in life in South Africa's undeveloped rural areas, of which Tugela Ferry is an archetypal example.

This paper describes some interrelated aspects of the HRDD project and their implications.

Perceptions of the project

If all partners shared the same view of what constituted overall success at HRDD project sites this success would be, there would perhaps be a shared sense of the direction of desirable progress. As it is, in spite of all having accepted the same proposals, partners' views of desirable and practically realisable outcomes are different.

For funders and implementing organisations, success would mean that previously educationally disadvantaged people, having gained the equivalent of a primary school education through ABE classes, would be playing a role as active citizens of a democracy by:

- showing a critical awareness of issues that affect the nation as well as the local community,

- communicating needs to their representatives, (from whom they would demand accountability),
- accessing resources,
- launching more community projects based on the experience and learning from successes or failures in the initial funded community projects,
- engaging in conflict resolution based on dialogue rather than violence,
- choosing representatives and leaders on the basis of leadership qualities, integrity and positive track records of delivery rather than traditional political allegiances, and
- finding or at least seeking effective ways of containing crime and vandalism within their communities rather than being held to ransom by young, destructive criminal bands.

The vision of partners based in rural communities is far less ambitious, usually not openly spoken of, but expressed occasionally and usually obliquely by facilitators based in the communities. It appears to entail:

- keeping contact people from implementing organisations feeling positive enough to ensure the continued trickle of funding into the community,
- earning a little from the income generation projects (which are not expected to last) and
- gaining some education from ABE classes.

Of course this necessitates all community members their doing their best to give the impression that they share the vision of success of the implementing and funding organisations.

So while the managing organisations strive to support progress made in communities without playing a managing role (which is not easy), community participants make certain that they tell anyone who asks how they are enjoying the projects, and how they are all working together and making progress. Of course this is not untrue, but it sometimes takes a great deal of probing to discover problems, even if they have resulted in the project grinding to a halt altogether. This way of reporting is amplified by the aspect of Zulu culture which sees rudeness in reporting things that a hearer might not be pleased to hear.

It is difficult to judge the aspirations described above. On one hand, the aspirations of most of the facilitators and community participants may be much lower than those of the partners who live on the outside of the communities because it is truly unrealistic to think that the envisioned goals can be achieved in the communities at the project sites. Insiders may well have the most accurate view of what they can achieve in their communities. On the other hand, long term poverty and the effects of apartheid may have resulted in habitual perceptions and meaning perspectives that Mezirow would surely see as dysfunctional, and that have resulted in hopeless dependence, and crippled the imagination of people so that they do not see a different way of being. This interpretation would echo Barry's observation (noted earlier) of authoritarian rule being followed by apathy (Barry 2000 p197).

Combination of education for democracy with ABE classes

The idea of combining simple education for democracy with ABE classes initially appeared uncomplicated. It seemed obvious that facilitators could easily be trained to teach their learners about the new constitution, and that texts chosen for use in both mother-tongue literacy classes and English second language classes could relate to education for democracy.

It also seemed quite possible that facilitators, with the benefit of some training could lead discussions that explored the content of these texts, and the implications of the Constitution to learners' life situations.

In practice, as always, simplicity eluded us. Facilitators had difficulty in following a training course on the new Constitution and its implications for ordinary people, since, although the course was publicised as one designed to be accessible to ordinary people, it required familiarity with some academic procedures and competence in written and spoken English that was beyond the capabilities of most of the facilitators. In a post course evaluation participants expressed their feelings of helplessness in attempting to keep up with the instructors, and few have since managed to put what they should have learnt in this course into practice .

Another part of training for offering education for democracy involved the use of a book produced in the Centre for Adult Education called *The Women's Handbook*. That this book was completed at the time that the facilitators needed training was entirely coincidental, but it proved to be a central resource in the project. This book was written in simple language and aims give ordinary women information they need to know in order to access resources (such as pensions and water schemes), manage negotiations with officialdom, and to understand how the systems of government affect their lives.

After the lack of success of the instructional type of training described above, a task based style of training was used to prepare facilitators to use *The Women's Handbook*. In this, participants were presented with a range of social and political problems, fictitious and fairly colourful, but typical of problems faced by uneducated people in rural communities, and were required to discuss these problems and find some ways of dealing with them. Without any introduction to the book, they were given copies, and told that the book might contain ideas for dealing with the problems. Facilitators embarked enthusiastically on this training task and in the course of somewhat lengthy searches for information relating to the problems they had to deal with, found their way about *The Women's Handbook* and familiarised themselves with what it contained. This practical task-based training proved much more effective than the more instructional approach of the first part of their training. Facilitators continue to rely on *The Women's Handbook* as one of two main resources for the education for democracy that they do in the classes.

The other resource is a weekly ABE newspaper supplement (*Learn with Echo*) published by the Centre, which offers material designed particularly for adults with low levels of literacy and language skills. As one of the partner organisations, this supplement carries material created specially for the HRDD project.

Facilitators spend much of the time given to education for democracy in ABE classes on exploration of social problems such as domestic abuse. However, this can hardly be seen as a tangential issue when so many of the issues of power and disempowerment manifest in the homes of ordinary people. We cannot expect a woman to be interested in finding out how the local government articulates with the national one if she wants to talk about her husband's threat of beating her for attending ABE classes.

Setting up and running of community projects by participants

The setting up of these projects was very slow. Being asked to participate as partners rather than recipients of aid was completely unfamiliar to the participants and the process of getting them to choose a project seemed interminable. Some, particularly those in Tugela Ferry, simply said they would not believe that there was money available for community projects unless they saw it. Even when they had been persuaded that they could access money, they argued that it would be better if someone set up a firm and employed them, regardless of how low the wages might be. In a very real sense, people were declining a chance of self directed development and actually asking to be exploited. While this sounds very disheartening to people hoping to inspire self directed development in a community, it must be recognised that, like the limited aspirations described above, this attitude might be one that has real survival value in a context where people are acutely aware of a complete lack of successful development initiatives in their areas, and possibly have a greater understanding of the reasons for this lack than do enthusiastic outsiders.

The pleas for unconditional employment notwithstanding, when Tembaletu attempted to force progress by nudging participants into particular projects, people complained that they were not being allowed to choose their own projects after all.

The projects finally embarked on were all income generation projects, which is predictable given the poverty that characterises rural areas. Nothing innovative was suggested, and people chose block-making, sewing and chicken rearing, all currently popular as community projects.

The extent to which the aim of running the community projects was met

The overall aim of running the projects was to afford ordinary people in rural communities an opportunity to exercise newly gained rights, access resources and practise self directed community development. Part of the plan for the project was that learning opportunities for participants would be maximised if they were given as much control as possible of their projects, with guidance and support from implementing organisations.

Once again, this simple sounding plan has proved elusive. It requires allowing people to deal with problems without help so that they can learn from the process, and the consequences of their actions. But organisations involved have been unable to resist responding to participants' calls for help in dealing with problems, especially where it is clear that giving help will save money, and solve problems that discourage participants and set progress back in the short term.

Unfortunately, the knowledge of the availability of assistance has resulted in the real perception that the locus of control of the projects is not squarely in the communities. Withholding of assistance might have forced participants to exercise their own initiative and take real control of the projects. On the other hand it is true that it might have resulted in their collapse.

A flaw in the original plan was the over-optimistic assumption that reflection on what was going on in the projects would happen as a matter of course, in evaluation workshops and through communication with support staff visiting projects. This reflection was essential to the process of providing opportunities of reviewing and possibly reconstructing habitual ways of understanding. Now, two thirds of the way through the project, it is clear that a much more structured process of reflection is necessary.

Publication of informal basic education materials drawing on this project, and attempts to evoke a critical attitude in participants.

In publishing accounts of the projects in the ABE newspaper supplement the emphasis was sometimes on successes, in which case the reports were purely celebratory, and used the projects as role models for other readers. Where reports focussed on shortcomings, the idea was that other readers could learn from mistakes made, but they were sometimes a fairly desperate attempt to jolt participants into taking initiative, even if they subsequently bore a grudge against the Centre, which was a cost we were prepared to bear. We would have welcomed criticism from participants for presenting them in a bad light, but their response was, as always, to express gratitude, in this case specifically for encouraging them by pointing out their lapses.

Trying to elicit critical comment from participants has been an ongoing struggle since the project began. One of the strategies employed was to make evaluation reports available in Zulu to all participants, and then to plan a session for critical debate of the reports as part of an end of the year seminar. This strategy worked no better than previous attempts at eliciting critical comment; as usual in evaluation workshops, participants once again expressed only humble gratitude.

Our frustration with our continual failure to elicit even the beginnings of critical comment was somewhat allayed by a suggestion from a colleague (whose own background is similar to that of participants) that the language of critical debate is simply not understood by African people living in rural contexts. It is the language of academic and political discourse, and it was unrealistic for us to expect our rural partners to be able to use it in interaction with us.

Another view of our failure to elicit critical comment is one of perceived power relations. Freire's position would be that true communication requires equality between speakers, and no matter how hard we, as staff of organisations working to implement the project, tried to put rural participants at their ease and insisted that we were all equal participants, the fact that we always arrive in cars, and (it has to be said, somewhat painfully), that some of us are white inevitably results in rural participants perceptions of very weighted power relations between us. This perception is not conducive to a feeling of freedom to engage in critical communication.

The admission of community ABE teachers to the University Diploma in Adult Education

The first difficulty with this initiative was organising alternative access to a university course for the facilitators. This is an issue which the university is going to have to deal with increasingly as its exclusivity is challenged. At present, rhetoric about community outreach and becoming more widely accessible is not matched by procedures. For example, students

were frequently asked to produce the school leaving certificates generally required for university entrance, although this requirement had been especially waived for them, because the rules followed by administration simply did not allow for alternative access.

With regard to expectations of the course, staff at the Centre hope that the course they offer will equip community educators to be as effective as possible in playing a positive role in the development of their communities. The facilitators' personal view of success entails completing their community educator qualification in the hope that it will help them secure jobs outside the communities, and thus providing a ticket to leave the communities.

Relevant to the purposes of this paper are difficulties encountered in using two languages (English and Zulu) in training, and attitudes of students to their own home language Zulu being used in university classes (at this undergraduate certificate level), and attitudes of students to Zulu as an indigenous language used as a language of higher learning.

The facilitators who attended the university community educators' class were all first language Zulu speakers, and their English competence ranged from fair to very weak. Since the group had one central lecturer for their first year of study, who was willing to use both languages in class, in an attempt to accommodate students weak in English, an unplanned system of communication evolved where English and Zulu were probably each used for 50% of class time. English was used as the main oral and written medium in the course, but information was frequently restated in Zulu by the lecturer, and much of the discussion, both in small groups and in whole class dialogue, was conducted in Zulu.

From the lecturer's point of view this was very satisfactory, since it improved the level of students' comprehension, and because class discussions in Zulu were livelier and far more extensive than discussions in English.

However, some students who were competent in English objected to the use of Zulu, and argued strongly that at this level of any university course all of their classmates should be able to cope with English as the exclusive medium of communication. Their attitude reflects a fairly strong stigmatisation of the Zulu language among its own speakers. There is a definite tendency to associate the use of English with sophistication and upward mobility, and, although I suggest this very tentatively, there is among some young people an association of the use of Zulu with poverty and ignorance.

In further reflection of this attitude, while all students participated in Zulu discussions, there was almost no response to an invitation to the weaker students to write assignments in Zulu. Even when some of them were instructed to do this, because their limitations in English were stifling their expression of their understanding, not a single student ever submitted a complete assignment in Zulu; even the weakest soldiered on with English wherever they could, sometimes switching between the two languages in mid-sentence.

At the beginning of their second and final year, their perseverance with English proved to have been better placed than my encouragement of their use of Zulu when they were faced with a lecturer who does not speak Zulu. With him, students whose English is weak are at a loss, and the lecturer is hard pressed to elicit participation from them. This is unusual in second year students, probably because those whose English is weak have usually dropped out at this stage.

In a bid to improve matters we offered the students an ongoing communicative course in English that runs alongside the other courses for the whole of their second and final year. Areas of weakness are selected from examination of students' written assignments and difficulties in communication identified by lecturers, and these are used as areas of specific focus in the English course. There is enthusiastic participation on this English course, and the students express great enjoyment of it. The course appears to be having a positive effect on the students' use of English, but it is difficult to separate its effects from other factors, such as being forced to use English in class because of lecturers' inability to use Zulu.

At this stage we are left with unresolved and opposite questions about the language issue:

Is it right to use Zulu as a language of higher learning when students will inevitably face some situations where they are expected to be competent in English?

On the other hand, is it right to have competence in English as a prerequisite for a course in community development that is attended almost entirely by speakers of African languages who are preparing themselves for work situations in which they will communicate principally, and in some cases almost exclusively, in Zulu?

Money Management

Naturally, some of the steps in the tango relate to money. The organisation that has the responsibility of managing the funds supplied by the Embassy of Finland is Tembaletu Community Education Centre. In the face of a plethora of reports of NGOs' mismanagement of money from international donors in recent years, this organisation is naturally anxious to demonstrate its solid dependability to funders (on whom they are almost entirely dependent for their survival). This translates into the practice of keeping very strict control over all the money provided, and hence into refusal to pay any money out without following the strictest possible procedures of control. While this is entirely laudable from the point of view of scrupulous book-keeping its effect is to prevent communities from exercising discretion over money allocated to them in the funding agreement, and to obviate learning opportunities in relation to money management.

In a corresponding move, the evaluating team has urged that accounting practices be altered to accommodate increased discretion over funds being extended to participating community members. This, understandably was not met with ready acceptance by those responsible for managing funds at Tembaletu, and the issue remains one of debate.

In relation to this debate, the project officer from the Embassy of Finland pointed out the irony of African people on the co-ordinating committee (and there are more black than white) behaving like the British colonial powers debating the capacity of colonised people to manage their own affairs in discussions relating to the granting of their independence.

Conclusion

Overall there seems to be a directly inverse correlation between learning opportunities and smooth progress in all aspects of the HRDD project, for both rural participants and members of staff from organisations working to implement the project. Although this seems quite

predictable when reflecting on the project from this distance, this realisation continues to take us by surprise when we see it happening in practice. Involvement in the HRDD project continues to be a rich learning experience for the Centre for Adult Education, and we look forward to our continued work on it.

In attempting to identify key things we have learnt so far from our efforts on this project, I keep returning to the importance of reflection in a learning process. In the busy activity of trying to keep all the elements of the project on the go in all six areas, and keep up to date with the training course for facilitators, as well as the production of learning materials, it has been all too easy to neglect this vital part of the learning process. Although it might not have made much difference, I suspect we would have done better to sacrifice any other aspect of the project.

References

- Barry, I. Women, Literacy and Social Change: The case of the "Guilintico" Women's group in Gongore. *Adult Education and Development IZZ DVV* Volume 55 2000.
- Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Inc.
- Oduaran, A. Globalization and lifelong education: reflection on some challenges for Africa *International Journal of Lifelong Education* Volume 3 May-June 2000.
- Omolewa, M. The Language of Literacy. *Adult Education and Development IZZ DVV* Volume 55 2000.
- Shor, I (1987) *Freire for the classroom: a source book for liberatory teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers Inc.
- Walters, S., and Watters, K. Twenty Years of Adult Education in Southern Africa *International Journal of Lifelong Education* Volume 20 January - April 2001.

The importance of the tutor in open and distance learning (ODL)

Helen Lentell, *The Commonwealth of Learning*.

Hlentell@col.org

Abstract

Tutors in distance education have always been the poor relations of course authors. This is a result of the implicit hierarchy in distance education provision, which favours and admires writing materials over teaching. The tutors role is little understood both by managers of distance education provision and by writers in the field of distance education. However all this looks like changing as a consequence of external factors to ODL and the tutor is not only being recognised as important, but also being written into the distance education script.

This paper seeks to identify why tutoring has been a devalued activity. It establishes core activities tutors conventionally and typically carry out. It explores some key external factors that are driving ODL to change and thereby to (belatedly) recognise the pivotal role of the tutor. And, finally, it describes the kind of distance education provision that is placing the tutor centre stage.

The background

Way back, or so it seems, in the 1990s the distance education community debated the Fordist nature of distance education. This was a discussion that was rooted in Peters work⁶, which had characterised distance education as an industrialised process of education with a clearly defined division of labour. On the whole colleagues writing in this field saw industrialisation as a “bad” thing – leading to an increase in administrative and management control, de-skilling, and sequential rather than integrated “product” development and production⁷. Concerns over deskilling were invariably expressions of disquiet over the position of central faculty in universities like the UK OU who were seen as losing autonomy. The ability to freely initiate, define and guide the academic and educational processes was seen to be being eroded. The position of other staff, equally important in the process of course production and presentation, was ignored.

In an excellent essay Greville Rumble⁸ critiqued the Fordist argument both from within the theoretical framework that defined Fordism, as well as from the empirical world of distance education’s institutional practice. However he conceded that there may well be deskilling for those academics, e.g. tutors, employed as temporary, part time or contract staff. “There seems little doubt that the work undertaken by peripheral workers within distance education – and

⁶ Peters, O (1983) Distance teaching and industrial production. A comparative interpretation in outline” in Stewart, D, Keegan, D and Holmberg, B (eds.) 1983, *Distance education: international perspectives*. London, Croom Helm.

⁷ See e.g. Campion, M and Renner, (1992) The supposed demise of Fordism: implications for distance education and higher education, *Distance Education*, 13 (1), pp. 7-28. And Raggatt, P. 1993. Post Fordism and distance education – a flexible strategy for change, *Open learning*, 8 (1), pp.21-31.

⁸ Rumble, G “Labour market theories and distance education 11: How Fordist is distance education?” *Open Learning*, 10 (2), pp12-29.

particularly those who tutor and counsel students, or mark their assignments and examination scripts – involves less skill than a traditional academic job”⁹.

It is a highly questionable assumption whether the role of tutor is being “deskilled”, although it is true that there has been little sustained attention given to tutoring by ODL theorists. Tait has recently pointed out, that “whilst there is a substantial literature on methodologies relating to the production of course materials and resources in open and distance learning (ODL), relatively little has been written about the planning and management of student support.”¹⁰ Tait is however referring to the range of services and activities that can broadly be termed student services – tutoring he identifies as a subset of these. Broadly this is the approach taken by the contributors to the collection of papers presented at the ICDE 20th World Conference by the UK OU Student Services division¹¹. Here student services are seen as the processes that have to be in place to ensure that the service is delivered efficiently and effectively. And if little has been written about planning and managing student services even less has been written about tutoring. As with conventional classroom teaching, the voice of the teacher is mute¹². Perhaps this is because tutors in ODL define their professional and academic home as their academic and subject discipline, and not the group of people concerned with wider student support and delivery systems. This would not be surprising if, as Rumble suggests, their work as tutors is viewed as low status and routine rather than central to student learning. In the UK OU the relationship a tutor has with a faculty is cemented by line management responsibilities: tutors report to staff tutors who are faculty staff and it is they who recruit them. Student support systems cover the wider services of e.g. enquiry, guidance, course choice, registration, fee payments, etc. and are located in the non-academic, operations unit - Student Services Division. Staff tutors have no accountability to Student Services.

Tutoring is certainly under valued in distance education as the quote from Rumble affirms. In most distance education provision tutors occupy a second class position and are on the periphery of the academy, and this is true even when they may be prestigious academics elsewhere. This lowly status stems from the lack of significance attributed to teaching by academic staff in universities – research counts for much more. And also from the employment position of tutors in much distance education provision – (part time and paid on some form of piece-work system) – as well as the privileging of those with permanency and central faculty roles. Moreover the literature on “deskilling” as it applies to distance education is imbued with elitism in that it values those who author study materials over all others in the collective endeavour of distance education. This is the case even when the final study materials may, due to the input of other professionals - e.g. educational developers, instructional designers, designers, those with expertise in assessment, editors – have changed the original “academic” submission beyond recognition. It has always seemed to me that a fundamental weakness in distance education’s understanding of itself is its failure to grasp the centrality of the tutor, among the many others, involved in distance education provision¹³. Within the UK OU the tutor falls between two monoliths – the academic faculty on the one hand and student services – operations and customer services on the other. The effect of this

⁹ Ibid. p. 17.

¹⁰ Tait, A. (2000) Planning Student Support for Open and distance Learning. *Open learning* Volume 15 (3) p. 287.

¹¹ Student Services, The Open University (2001) *Student Services at the UK Open University*

¹² See e.g. Schratz, M (1993) (ed.) *Qualitative voices in Educational Research* Falmer Press

¹³ Lentell, H.M. (1994) Why is it so Hard to Hear the Tutor in Distance Education? *Open Learning* Volume. 9.(3) pp 49-52.

is that tutoring for learning, and the institutional understanding of how student learning develops and progresses and is affected by e.g. course design and assessment, is no ones meaningful responsibility.

Otto Peters characterisation of distance education is fundamentally right – distance education involves an increased division of labour, and therefore managing educational processes does become essential. However it is misguided to assume that because the distance education author is not supreme that this represents some form of deskilling and managerialism and all this is “a bad thing”¹⁴. (Indeed for many employed in universities the professional bureaucracy of the conventional academic organisational structure is equally managerial¹⁵). But neither does it follow that the so-called managers of distance education will necessarily have a holistic view of their practice. Few will appreciate what the tutor does, and fewer still will understand that the tutor more than the course materials - however well designed – underpins learning.

What do tutors do in distance education?

Tutors facilitate and guide the learning of their students so that the students gain knowledge and understanding. To achieve this, tutors develop and practice a multitude of skills and strategies. It is arguable that these skills are no different to those employed by teachers in contiguous environments, and this may well be true. But distance educators have been far more student-focused than typically is the case of their colleagues in conventional academic institutions¹⁶.

The typical duties of a distance education tutor can be drawn from tutor handbooks and guides. One such notes that the main role of the subject tutor is to:

- *ensure students gain a thorough grounding in the subject*
- *provide students with academic support in the subject*
- *help students explore the links between this module and other modules*
- *help students integrate practical work experience with academic knowledge.*

Subject tutors are not required to deliver the curriculum – this is the task of the study guides – but to facilitate students’ learning. This is done through:

- *sensitive and full commentaries / feedback on students’ assignments.*
- *being available on the phone or via e mail so that students can contact tutors for advice.*

¹⁴ Lentell, H. M. (1999) “Quality Assurance of Distance Education – Management Seriously Matters” *Open Praxis* Vol.2.

¹⁵ See e.g. Mintzberg, H (1983) *Structure In Fives: Designing Effective Organisations*. Prentice-Hall.

¹⁶ See eg. Keegan, D. (1996 3rd. edition) *Foundations of Distance Education*, Routledge.

- *introducing the key learning points of the module at the two residential schools associated with the module, and devising group and individual sessions to assist understanding of the module*
- *maintaining necessary contact with your students' tutor mentors.*

Subject tutors are expected to:

- *support and monitor their students' studies*
- *provide designated weekly telephone contact points when tutors are available to their students*
- *mark and provide detailed feedback on their students' assignments within 10 days of receiving them from the NEC*
- *work closely with their lead tutor and fellow tutors*
- *run seminars and lectures at residential school*
- *keep full and accurate records for the purpose of monitoring progress*
- *liaise closely with their students' tutor mentor*
- *first mark their students exam papers and provide exam feedback for each student*
- *write an end-of-module report on each student in their group.*
- *participate fully in staff development and course evaluation.¹⁷*

This list of tasks and responsibilities require and demonstrate that tutors are highly skilled. They need to understand their subject, be totally committed to their students learning, and to be effective teachers.

The changing environment

Tutors have always have been central to distance education students' successful learning, but they have largely gone unrecognised in the literature on distance education. However over the last few years I have begun to notice that tutoring is becoming more prominent in the discourse of distance education provision and in actual distance education practice. This change appears to have been driven by factors external to ODL. Broadly these factors are:

- Quality assurance processes imposed externally on providers by government and funders seeking at one and the same time efficiency and effectiveness. For example, in the UK, The Quality Assurance Agency's core business is to review the quality and standards of higher education in universities and colleges. It does this by auditing institutional arrangements for managing quality and standards, including arrangements for assessing the quality and standards of teaching and learning at subject level. These activities result

¹⁷ National Extension College (2000) *Frontline Tutor Handbook*

in reports that are available to the public both as printed publications as well as on the Agency's web site. The Agency's mission is to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are being safeguarded and enhanced. It achieves this in a number of ways one of which is to provide, it says, "clear and accurate information to students, employers and others about the quality and standards of higher education"¹⁸. Whilst much has been written about the workings of QAA – both negative and positive – no provider can afford to ignore it. Poor subject review affects business. An inspection (or subject review) has put in the spotlight the work of tutors and all the processes that are put in place to brief, support and monitor them.

- The growing commercialisation of distance education, whilst causing disquiet that educational provision will be subverted to crass market imperatives, has focused providers attention on students as customers. Moreover customers of services (teaching and learning support) as well as the product (study and course materials). Indeed the quality of customer service is, in the highly competitive distance learning market, frequently the distinguishing feature between providers. Thus, an aspect of the quality assurance processes in distance education, is the system that monitors and ensures customer satisfaction. This again means providers cannot ignore the work of the staff who have direct contact with students and who mediate the relationship between students (customers) and the institution. We have seen in recent years e.g. the benchmarking of student support – including tutor support, the development of customer complaints procedures, training and staff development for staff who handle enquiries and applicants as well as the tutoring staff.

Clearly the generality of student services are important in keeping the student-customer satisfied. If these services collapse or only inadequately satisfy the students needs then an issue of service competency and delivery are raised for the student-customer. But in essence these are back office concerns, and students are only aware of them when they fail in some way. Of far more immediate import is their tutor. The tutor is their ongoing contact point. The tutor is the one who helps them learn what they actually signed up to and purchased. It is the tutor who individualises and mediates the mass produced product (the course) of distance education. It is only to the tutor that the ODL learner exists as an individual. Market sensitive providers recognise this crucial aspect of service provision and have addressed the service standards (quality of tuition) this raises.

- A new, world wide engagement with ODL is taking place fuelled by the development of ICT. There has been an enormous proliferation of e courses, which can be studied at a distance. These range on one end of the scale to small initiatives run on the enthusiasms of individual lecturers and teachers, to major developments funded by huge corporate financial investments. Dhanarajan¹⁹ has pointed out that there is a naïve faith that the new technologies will solve the problems of educational deprivation around the world, and he rightly points out the challenges the technology poses. These challenges are not about the potential of the technology but include, among others, lack of skills in using the technology for teaching and learning.

¹⁸ www.qaa.ac.uk

¹⁹ Dhanarajan, G. (2001) Distance Education: promise, performance and potential. *Open Learning* Volume 16 (1)

Many recent educational and training developments launched themselves on assumptions that replaced the tutor with clever technology – e.g. the University for Industry in the UK. Scepticism about the claims being made for the technology was heresy. Now, bloodied by reality and experience, educational providers know the technology is not a quick and cheap fix. It requires tremendous, sustained effort on the part of providers and makes huge demands on critical resources. But the experience has demonstrated that the tutor far from being redundant is in fact vital. Laurence Herbert, Head of Business Development and Marketing at the National Extension College, and a business realist not an educational sentimentalist, in a summary of the 2001 meeting of the European Association of Distance Learning, noted, “I was particularly struck at the importance attached to the tutor/mentor role, by Joaquim Daurella in his case study of e-learning provision for SMEs in Barcelona. He defined the tutor's role as a combination of being dynamic and motivational; proactive, available and speedily responsive; and, of course, pedagogically supportive. He had no hesitation in attributing the high success and completion rates of his students to the tutor support they enjoyed during their studies.”²⁰ This appraisal of the technology, grounded in experience, is beginning to be reflected in the publications around the educational use of ICT. No longer are these limited to the technical tools to “get on line” – but rather they are exploring pedagogical skills²¹.

- Herbert’s report draws attention to another development: niche and specialist provision with his reference to programmes for SMEs (small medium sized enterprises). Partly this is a consequence of the undoubted potential offered by ICT and the modern requirements for on-demand access for information and skills. Just in time learning. However whilst the technology might be the means to achieving specialist provision, it is not the key driver of change. The key driver is cash. What are customers and/or governments or funding agencies prepared to pay for? In the UK the relationship between governments and universities and colleges has been transformed. Higher education is no longer totally dependent on the state for funding, - indeed the state is no longer a monolithic entity with a single purpose, there are numerous departments with their own particular agendas using access to funding to realise these agendas. In addition there are other agencies e.g. agencies within the European Union. Most of these bodies establish contractual relationships with providers. Thus we have experienced major changes to the ways in which state and public funds are allocated. To obtain funding institutions must demonstrate that they can meet the policy objectives of the government or agency – so bidding, target setting, auditing, measuring, accounting are the currency of the modern funding regimes.

In effect the reach of the state is arguably stronger, despite rhetoric to the contrary, with contractual as opposed to fiduciary relationships and tighter political control with the establishment of formal audit and assessment systems. Thus is an elite system transformed into a mass one. Thus is the articulation between the polity and the academy made, at one and the same time, both more complex and more direct.

²⁰ Herbert,L.(2001) 'The Ten Commandments' EADL Internal report The National Extension College.

²¹ See for example: Burge, E.J (ed.) (2000) *The Strategic use of Learning Technologies* Jossey-Bass. The National Extension College (2001) *Tutoring Online*. Salmon, G (2000) “E-Moderating” Kogan Page.

Through these funding mechanisms funding agencies can target which group of the population is to benefit from education and training opportunities. These groups may not have participated in educational provision previously. Nor would they have been catered for either because it was too difficult and/or expensive to do so, or because traditionally educational provision has been provider led. As a consequence the members of the academy defined educational opportunities – and many outside the club were unaware of what was available or saw it as an irrelevance. This is not viable in a knowledge economy with a political agenda of inclusivity.

The availability of funding that is targeted has allowed institutions and individuals within them to bid for resources that have enabled them to work with excluded groups. For those of us in distance education we have been able to use our methodology - indeed to adapt and to refine it – for student groups that would not have given the student volume to make tailored provision economically feasible. (Much of this funding is short term and administratively burdensome making sustainability an issue but that is not the concern here.)

These four factors external to ODL – quality assurance, commercialisation, ICT and new forms of funding - I would argue have enabled the tutor in distance education to come into their own. The impact of this is the focus of the remaining section of this paper.

The tutor: coach and mentor

In 1998 APU (Anglia Polytechnic University) and the NEC (National Extension College) successfully bid to the European Social Fund (ESF) for funding to develop accessible and relevant higher education learning opportunities for the owners, managers and employees of small and medium sized businesses (SMEs). A second tranch of funding was secured in 2001, when the partnership was joined by the national training organisation for small business (SFEDI). A dynamic small business community was seen as crucial – (being 96% of all UK business and employing some 80% of the working population) – in ensuring that the UK became a more enterprising nation. SMEs had not typically participated in training. It was assumed that this was because SMEs did not recognise or have the resources to invest in training. Until the advent of ESF funding the specific training needs of SMEs had been largely ignored – or there had been a (misguided) assumption that their needs were the same as those of the corporate sector.

In planning what the Sesame - (Small Enterprise Sensitive Accessible Management Education) - programme should be a number of key underpinning principles were established.

- All learning should start with the learning needs of the students. That is within each module the student would individually define what their learning problems were and what they wanted to be able to do or know by the end of the module of study. This would be established through extensive discussions with their tutor and would lead not only to drawing up a learning contract, but also establish the process of study.
- The learning materials would not be linear – there would be no curricula defined beginning and end. Students would be able, with the guidance of their tutor to concentrate on some units, or none of them, according to their learning needs. Thus the modules would be supplemented and added to by tutor guidance.

- The learning experiences would create opportunities for students to relate their learning experiences to the workplace – so the extensive use of case studies and exemplars were developed and tutors were actively encouraged to add to these. Moreover tutors were required to get to know in some detail the work situation of each of their students.
- Both formative and summative assessment must reflect the work based learning of the programme, and demonstrate the learning that had occurred. It would be learning journal and project based. Assessment would not be compulsory – although we would strongly encourage students to use the formative assignments. (In adopting this approach we were greatly assisted by the funding in that what we were required to report on was student participation and not student completion.)
- Accreditation should be available for those who wanted it so a diploma of credit in small business management was negotiated through the university and will be awarded on the completion of 3 modules (60) credits. There must be clear progression roots into other programmes.
- Everything would be done at a distance through e mail and telephone contact – there were no organised tutorials or residential schools thus enabling students to study according to their own requirements. The only requirement was that students completed each module in 15 weeks, now extended to 20 weeks. This was to ensure that we fitted into the funding time scale.

The implication for the tutor role of this approach was very significant. It is very intensive and personal to each student. We expected tutors to be proactive rather than reactive and they were contracted to contact each student on their list weekly. They had to be able to help the student articulate their learning needs and help them acquire the skills of reflection. They had to have a deep conceptual understanding of the subject area in order to appropriately and confidentially guide student learning. In this sense they were a knowledge resource equal to the study materials. Tutors had to be able to help students translate real world problems experienced at work into a form from which they could learn. The problems identified on the first presentation ranged from deciding which altar candles to burn - a significant issue for a local Roman Catholic priest on the financial management course - to guiding a student through the process of working out how he might diversify his business. In this case the student's micro business had been solely based on supplying a large multinational with components but the multinational was about to withdraw from the country and our students business looked like going down with it. This student was registered on a strategic management course. In this way tutors were also key in setting the assessment – although the leaning journal and project had frameworks to guide students and tutors.

With such a personal, active and direct role tutors could only handle a small number of students – no more than 12 in the first presentation. Thus there could be no economy of scale for these tutors – a possibility when all students are submitting for marking the same assignment at the same time. With Sesame each student is completely different. This made it exceedingly difficult to work out how to pay tutors and to determine the basis for this, given that some students did the assignments, and others did not but still had weekly contact with their tutor. This meant that we had to move away from a simplistic piece work rate and find some more appropriate and professional form of remunerating tutors to take into account the role they were playing and not to exploit them. This role also includes regular feedback to the programme administrators and managers in order that the programme can be effectively monitored and adapted if necessary. Tutors also maintain regular contact with each other through e-mail, providing learning support for each other.

Clearly in a simple market situation the Sesame programme would not be viable. The set up and presentation costs have been very high. But the programme is viable because of the ESF funding and the positive government steer to work in this area. The project management team are exploring the cost implications of offering the programme without this funding and the position is looking positive.

The Sesame programme, and indeed some of the accounts of on-line tuition – are showing that the tutor is indispensable. They need to have knowledge and a broad conceptual understanding of their field. They have to be effective listeners and communicators, to be a coach, facilitator, mentor, supporter, and resource. They have to listen, to shape, to give feedback, to motivate, to direct, to appreciate – broadly to be developmental and problem solving. This is not deskilling.

Conclusion

The role of the tutor in the Sesame programme goes beyond the conventional understanding of the tutor in distance education. The tutor has been seen by distance education theorists, and distance education managers, as “deskilled” and peripheral. However this conventional understanding of the role has seriously underestimated the significance of the tutor in distance education generally. But this cannot continue because external factors are forcing change. Tutors are coming into their own and with it placing student learning centre stage.

Internationalising university curriculum: responding to ‘difference’ in designing open and online learning environments

Jan Mahyuddin, Deakin University
Alison Littler, The Open University
Mary Rice, Deakin University

Any process of internationalising curriculum within higher education institutions offering distance, open and/or online learning raises critical questions relating to ‘designing for difference’ for those who teach, and for those who support teachers in the development of culturally responsive learning environments and resources for students.

The design of open and/or online learning in higher education is informed by conscious and, often, not-so-conscious, frameworks which embody values we hold, and shape and give meaning to the practices we undertake. Those of us who teach, or who support the processes of teaching and learning in higher education, generally try to practice in ways that reflect accepted principles of effective design: for example, building, as a first step, our understandings of the students we will work with and the needs arising from their cultural contexts and prior learning experiences.

Attempts to ‘internationalise the curriculum’ have these issues embedded in them. The concept of ‘internationalising the curriculum’ currently encompasses diverse practices and strategies, but it could be said that much practice reflects an instrumentalist approach to the issue, that is one which does not fundamentally challenge held assumptions about cultural difference. Indeed, strategies for internationalising the curriculum can be identified, developed and accommodated within existing taken-for-granted cultural practices in ways that may even subvert the very values for practice which we already hold.

In this paper we consider some critical questions towards examining held assumptions, meanings and values around the issue of internationalising curriculum and the design of culturally responsive learning.

The writers are Anglo-Australian practitioners working across two western, English-language universities offering open and online learning: Deakin University in Australia and the Open University in the UK. Various, we are and have been responsible for supporting an institution in examining and enlarging its responses to notions of the internationalisation of curriculum, and/or mediating these in the design and development of open and online learning environments and resources.

The meanings of ‘internationalising curriculum’: Who makes them and where is the debate sited?

International or ‘instrumental’?

Some current understandings of internationalisation can be sourced to the discourses and practices of international education, international development and international relations; as well as within the financial investment which institutions have made in ‘international’ divisions or structures.

Many western countries have been, for some decades, ‘exporting’ education, and not only at tertiary level, through offering programs and teachers overseas/off-shore, or bringing in

students from overseas on programs offering support for living and study (such as the Australian Colombo Plan begun during the 1950s, for example). Some of Australia's tertiary institutions have set up off-shore campuses and programs. Much of this activity has aligned with national government approaches to international development and a mediation of international relations that has partnered altruistic strategies with pragmatism.

Australian universities, including Deakin University, have long had organisational structures set up to cater for the needs of Australian students undertaking some of their study overseas as well as of international students coming into the institution.

By comparison, the Open University in the UK enrolls students, and actively recruits staff, from overseas, from a variety of cultural backgrounds and languages; it sells its courses overseas to local host institutions who are responsible for the teaching; it licenses courses which sometimes, depending on third-party copyright provisions within the content, can be translated for local use; and it also franchises the OU's 'style', helping to set up other 'Open Universities' in other parts of the world.

Since its inception, the mission, or charter, of the Open University has been to be 'open as to:

- people,
- places,
- methods,
- ideas',

and for the United States Open University, 'open as to

- the world, and
- time'.

It would be a big claim, indeed, to say that the OU achieves these principles all the time, but used to guide the University's practice and future development they could be seen as claiming the ground when it comes to issues of difference, if not neatly sidestepping the issue of 'internationalisation', because that concept is embedded in its very charter. These principles do give rise, however, to practices, decisions and developments in 'international education' that have implied, if not explicit, meanings underpinning them.

'Why *do* international distance education?' asks Tony Bates (1999, n.p.), in an exploration of cultural and ethical issues in international distance education. Responding, simply, with 'money, money, money', Bates locates 'international education', whether distance or local, in what Fazil Rizvi and Lucas Walsh (1998, p.9) term 'discourses of economic necessity'.

Patricia Kelly, in 'Internationalising the curriculum: For profit or planet?', takes a further step, locating Australian practice around the internationalisation of curriculum firmly in the context of:

... educating *for profit*. This is expressed in policy meetings and documents as a combination of attracting full fee-paying overseas students; exporting ready-made courses to any country that will buy them; sending a tiny minority of wealthy or scholarship students abroad; setting up off-shore campuses and importing overseas staff.

(Kelly 2000, p. 162, our emphasis)

When engaging initially with emerging issues of internationalising curriculum, it is not surprising that some institutions draw on existing organisational structures and practices as a familiar 'jumping-off' point for institutional debate and policy development. There is a risk, however, in allowing familiarity to frame the dominant meanings of internationalising curriculum, and to claim the debate.

Institutions may indeed formulate narrow, instrumentalist objectives and practices of the kind Patricia Kelly describes: practices that pay little attention to coming to what Rizvi and Walsh (1998, p. 11) term a 'heightened awareness and appreciation of the politics of difference'. Such an awareness will have implications for what we choose to value and how we will practice the design of learning in an internationalised context.

If we do not explore 'the politics' of difference, 'internationalising curriculum' may come to be most valued, as Kelly puts it, as little more than an environmental 'flavour' that can be 'bought in' through importing students and staff considered sufficiently 'other' and 'different' (2000, p. 162).

What meanings, then, for internationalisation of curriculum may we draw from other discourses? Might these support a less instrumental and more responsive practice?

Attending to difference and alternate meanings

'To be attentive to difference', note Rizvi and Walsh (1998, p. 10), 'is to understand difference as dynamic, as always a product of history, culture, power and ideology'.

'Difference' and the politics of its self-ascribing or construction by others (see Rizvi & Walsh 1998, p.11) has a considerable history of interrogation within western higher education institutions, particularly by disciplines that are socio-culturally based. Earlier debate and practice have engaged and grappled with many issues that are now re-appearing under the rhetoric of 'the internationalisation of curriculum'.

Kelly notes that:

Because profit has made internationalisation attractive, it has renewed interest in and support for policies and programs similar to those *that should have been happening in response to the social and cultural diversity of the human community*.

(Kelly 2000, p. 162, our emphasis)

Discourses of social and cultural diversity in western societies arose from 'grassroots' activism around the politicisation of sex and gender, ethnicity and race, ability and disability, capital and class, wealth and poverty. Access, equity, 'inclusiveness' of diverse gender, culture, ability needs and perspectives have become accepted concepts —although not unproblematic—within which the design of teaching practices and learning strategies is to be reconsidered.

An essential focus has been on negotiating difference in a local 'multicultural' context, with nation-states addressing the claims of Indigenous groups and 'First Nations', or those of immigrant 'ethnic' groups. But as Kelly points out, "... our *multicultural reality* is the stage for internationalization" (2000, p. 162, our emphasis).

What aspects of existing discourses of education, of teaching and learning, might we also draw upon to frame our understandings? Notions of the making of curriculum as socially and culturally 'critical', and in need of ever-watchful 'deconstruction', have been with us since the 1960s. Might we partner these with more recent theorising about teaching for learning as a process of supporting the learner's self-'constructing' of understandings?

Within almost all socio-cultural discourses we find resistance to the assumption that notions of difference can be defined solely by those within a dominant culture unaware of its privileged position. These discourses recognise a need for the full participation of all (teachers, learners and community) in the experience of constructing meanings around what is to be valued, and practised, in the experience of learning.

And with the rise of discourses of globalisation fuelled by the dramatic uptake of computerised communication, and the potential for online learning to extend open learning practices, there are discourses of the 'future' as well as the past to draw upon. What might they add to our understandings?

In an observation that reminds us, too, of the implied responsibility within an internationalised context, Richard Bates (2000, n.p.), warns that 'the process of globalisation under its current form' identifies a 'significant cultural shift' in 'the abdication of the collective responsibilities of societies for all of their members ...'.

'It is ironic', notes Walsh, in an examination of internationalisation in relation to online learning, 'that as internationalisation compels greater awareness and recognition of the idea that knowledge is culture-bound, economic pressure to disseminate commercially viable courses narrows the range and depth of study available online' (1999, p. [5]).

Ultimately, those of us practising in open and online learning contexts may be driven towards instrumental practices in the process of internationalising curriculum by the very economic pressures that Walsh (1999) cites. Or, we may find the process socially and administratively generative, allowing us to 'stretch' in understandings and practice. This, however, as Tony Bates (1999) reminds us, is an arena in which pursuing the 'high moral ground' of acknowledging complex meanings around difference may prove an ideal difficult to transform into effective practice at the institutional level.

Reconsidering existing cultural boundaries: Framing the institutional debate

Senior executives in most universities are strongly influenced by external concerns relating to positioning institutions in a global marketplace. Key indicators of success for them will inevitably be an increase in the number of fee-paying international students enrolling. What messages, however, do such objectives send to institutional communities and teaching staff?

Rizvi and Walsh note that:

... [w]hen difference is constructed simply as a[n external] *resource* then the ways in which difference is historically constructed and plays an important role in defining social and administrative relationships within universities is effectively overlooked.

(Rizvi & Walsh 1998, p. 9, our emphasis)

What might be 'overlooked' can include:

- essentialist administrative processes assuming a universalist approach to student entry and access, and time engaged in learning;
- assumptions about needed proficiency in the dominant language of the local institution;
- culturally 'assumptionist' approaches to curriculum and teaching practices.

Any institutional debate about changing cultural boundaries and broadening perspectives must certainly include administrative staff and management personnel as well as teaching and support staff. But how might institutions engender such debate?

Deakin University, for example, has a professed aim to 'internationalise' both the University community and the curriculum. There are, however, no directives or prescriptions (desirable, perhaps?) for faculties, as to how they might enact this policy.

A University-wide committee (with faculty representatives) has been established to progress debate and ultimately to provide some strategies for implementation. Initial meetings of this committee have highlighted existing cultural boundaries and the ways in which these constrained early initiatives. For example, faculties that had 'jumped the gun' began to implement aspects of internationalisation centred on the need to increase revenue. They did so in uncontested ways and without a faculty-wide debate, seeking, through critical reflection, to identify the differing meanings and manifestations of internationalisation.

Discussions in the committee have drawn on a wide range of theoretical considerations and the practical experience of members who had reflected more on notions of 'difference' and 'deep inclusivity' in curriculum. They were able, at least in this central forum, to challenge more narrowly held views. Will they and others be able to do so in any University-wide debate?

The aim of the Deakin committee currently is to encourage further debate and generation of ideas across the University, within faculties, schools and disciplines. How might this be undertaken?

The committee has defined a need to determine what might constitute best practice in various disciplines and to share examples of pedagogical practice. It recognises that no single approach will be appropriate for all discipline areas. And, currently, the committee includes a student representative. But how well might one student represent the diverse views of an entire student body?

Curriculum practice and the construction of difference

How might notions of curriculum and discipline be defined when considering internationalising curriculum? Who decides what courses are to be offered, the rationale behind them, course content, teaching approaches, learning and assessment practices?

Rizvi and Walsh (1998, p. 9) argue that 'difference is not something that is external to the university, a resource that students bring to university. It is constructed and enacted through the practices of curriculum'.

Within a number of higher education institutions in Australia, under the banner of 'internationalising' curriculum and evolving from earlier discourses on multiculturalism, we find the recommendation of such curriculum practices as:

- ensuring that people from ‘minority’ cultural groups are made ‘visible’ in course content;
- foregrounding cultural issues in discussions; and
- encouraging discourse or examples drawn from different cultural experiences.

Such strategies are not unproblematic. In an international context (not to mention an increasingly globalised and selectively ‘wired’ one), just who might constitute a ‘minority group’? Will ‘minority groups’ be ‘made visible’ by participating with other stakeholders in the development of curriculum? Or will curriculum be developed, as is still entrenched practice in much higher education in Australia, essentially by teaching staff to ‘include’ information or content ‘making visible’ ‘minority’ groups? If the latter, then how is this more than a stirring together of a mix of apparently appropriate cultural ‘flavours’? (And how are the ‘flavours’ chosen?)

Are there other ways of challenging ‘cultural centrality’ in curriculum practices endeavouring to be responsive to difference?

The broader philosophical issue underpinning this debate remains: knowledge is not culture- or value-free. It is embedded in language and local social, cultural and political practices as well as in local (and national) histories. This is a difficult concept to enact in practice, since it raises issues about what is ‘good teaching practice’. Should good practice allow and encourage students to challenge constructs of knowledge and interrogate meanings, reforming and re-drawing accepted discipline boundaries? How far are we willing to go in ‘negotiating’ curriculum?

Online technologies, the advent of online conferencing, and the accompanying potential for institutions to reach ever more ‘international’ and culturally diverse cohorts of students, has brought the practices of teaching firmly back into the forefront. The addressing of these issues is inevitably challenging ‘instructivist’ approaches and traditional balances of power between teacher and learner (see Collis, cited in Ziguras 1999, p. [4]).

The Open University, for example, supports a number of research and development projects that focus on new technologies and their use in improving learning environments. These projects are also about developing and improving systems support to teaching staff. They aim to improve distance education delivery, but how far do they go in challenging the processes of knowledge construction and ownership?

There are instances, however, in the design of learning at the OU, that point to engagement with issues of language, of how language constructs ideas and knowledge. The institution has undertaken at least one project teaching online in English and languages other than English across selected European countries. Such projects recognise the importance of language in framing ideas and conveying cultural beliefs and assumptions, and that the ability and confidence of students working in a language other than their first will influence their learning success. Students participate in online conferences in their own (i.e. first) language *before* all coming together to share ideas in a common English-language conference.

Should we seek to develop ‘transcending curricula’ (transcending local cultural and language ‘barriers’ and offering ‘homogenous cultural representations’ assuming ‘universal relevance’ (Walsh 1999, p. [4])? Or do the imperatives of internationalisation and designing online

learning offer possibilities for transcending traditional 'ownership' of curricula through their shared 'construction'?

Notions around the 'shared' construction of formal knowledge are essentially western in origin. Non-western as well as some western students can be profoundly uncomfortable with participating in this way (Ziguras 1999). Curriculum and teaching practice that challenges meaning-making and taken-for-granted cultural assumptions may still be teacher-led, however, while employing strategies for encouraging student participation—selectively employing a problem-based learning approach, for example.

And what of the perennial issue, in open and online learning, of how pre-prepared resources and materials may relate to a more negotiated curriculum? How might we make explicit, with students, the implicit assumptions underlying selection of material and approach?

Who are our students, and what might 'access' or 'equity of opportunity' mean in an 'internationalised' educational environment?

How institutions and staff 'internationalising' open and online learning identify who their students are, or could be, takes the problematic issue of access well into the international arena.

Will access mean access of local 'non-wealthy' students (see again Kelly 2000, p. 162) to exchange and study-abroad programs? Approximately four per cent of all Australian students commencing in higher education currently have access to this kind of opportunity (see Davis, Milne & Olsen n.d.), although some Australian institutions are considering targets of at least ten per cent. (What of the remaining ninety per cent?)

Might it mean access of local culturally and economically diverse students to local learning experiences that encourage a sense of responsible citizenship in a *global* society (constructing curriculum that might explore economic and environmental sustainability, for example)?

In Australia, some of the 'policies and programs' of which Kelly (2000) speaks have been instrumental in greater access within higher education for its Indigenous people, for women, and for those with disabilities. Online and multimedia programs for remote Indigenous communities, for example, have been developed at the University of Western Australia and James Cook University—the latter considered some of the most 'culturally responsive learning design' within the world (Ziguras 1999, p. [3]).

Might access in an internationalised context mean that an institution will fund and support its 'off-shore' students in *their* local environment with local study centres and teachers who may mediate the originating institutions's more culturally 'generic' resources (Ziguras 1999, p. [6])? The Open University's concept of 'supported open learning' addresses this issue to some extent.

What of access of 'overseas' 'non-wealthy' students to study and exchange opportunities with 'us'? In an internationalised environment, for whose educational needs might we be willing (and able) to take responsibility?

James Speth, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Program, warns that 'if present trends continue, the defining concerns of international affairs in the next century, will resolve around the struggle for equity—equity among nations, equity within nations ...' (cited in Kelly 2000, p. 161).

Might policy and strategy of internationalisation within institutions such as Deakin and the OU come to acknowledge that any 'internationalisation' of institution, service and curricula that integrates online learning opportunities implies 'global' access and equity issues and responsibilities, as well as 'local' ones?

Those working in education with less-developed countries, for example, suggest that online technologies, combined with wireless or satellite technologies, offer real possibilities of challenging the 'digital divide'. A cultural perception of one community—one computer (that is, notions of community ownership of technology as property that are different from predominantly Anglo-European ones of individual ownership), coupled with leapfrogging older communication infrastructures, offer extraordinary possibilities for addressing educational need in new ways. (See again Ziguras (1999) on the programs with remote Indigenous Australian communities run by James Cook University.)

How students experience meanings around difference in such contexts will greatly depend, however, on how institutions support their staff in designing culturally responsive teaching and learning.

Supporting staff in 'designing for difference'

Kelly notes of the Australian context that:

... many faculties are being required to 'internationalize their curriculum' by a given date ... [but] ... most academics have been given few opportunities to understand the context or terminology and less support to put these into practice.

(Kelly 2000, p. 162)

Rizvi and Walsh (1998, p. 9) argue that professional development activities around internationalising curriculum issues have rarely worked to 'challenge normative cultures' within institutions but have acted, rather, as add-ons 'to the dominant culture, which in turn is assumed to be self-evident, consensual and homogeneous.' If this is so, then what kinds of support need to be pursued?

It is important, when 'internationalising curriculum', to reflect critically upon sources of debate and the politicisation of difference, in order to identify what values will drive our local practice. How do we ensure, however, that academic and professional staff are not left merely with 'rhetoric'?

Staff need to be supported in exploring diverse practices that are not only 'do-able' within the constraints of Australian or UK higher education institutions, but also recognisably converging with, rather than 'added on' to accepted 'good practice' in the design of open and online teaching and learning.

How might we ensure that differing approaches to academic and professional learning—from 'action learning' within the process of discipline-based course development to formal postgraduate study towards certification—will not 'isolate' the conceptualising of good practice in internationalising curriculum from conceptualising 'good practice' in open and online learning?

Conclusion: What is 'internationalisation of curriculum'?

The internationalisation of curriculum will mean, within any institutional community, whatever that community chooses to identify, value and practice.

If we choose, for whatever reasons, a more instrumental approach to internationalising curriculum, we may do so, nevertheless in full knowledge that there we may also choose opportunities for extending understandings, enlarging values and enhancing the effectiveness of culturally responsive practice in designing learning.

No institutional community in higher education is likely to agree and adhere to a single philosophy, but will construct meanings concomitant with a respect for the diverse viewpoints that constitute educational theory and practice.

References

- Bates, T. 1999, 'Cultural and ethical issues in international distance education', Engaging Partnerships: Collaboration and Partnership in Distance Education, UBC/CREAD conference, Vancouver, September 21–3, <<http://bates.cstudies.ubc.ca/CREAD.html>> (accessed 18 May, 2001).
- Bates, R. 2000, 'Administering the global trap: The role of educational leaders', BEMOS, <<http://www.shu.ac.uk/bemas/bates.html>> (accessed 5 May, 2001).
- Davis, D., Milne, C & Olsen, A. n.d., 'Becoming internationally competitive: The value of international experience for Australian students', IDP Education Australia, pp. 23–30.
- Kelly, P. 2000, 'Internationalising the curriculum: For profit or planet?', in *The University in Transformation: Global Perspectives on the Futures of the University*, eds S. Inayatullah & J. Gidley, Bergin & Garvey, Westport, CT.
- Rizvi, F. & Walsh, L. 1998, 'Difference, globalisation and the internationalisation of curriculum', *Australian Universities' Review*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 1–11.
- Walsh, L. 1999, 'Encounters with difference: In search of new learning spaces through internationalisation'; ASCILITE, 'Diversity', <<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane99/papers/walsh.pdf>>, (accessed 23 March 2001).
- Ziguras, C. 1999, 'Cultural diversity and transnational flexibility delivery', ASCILITE, 'Diversity', <<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/brisbane99/papers/ziguras.pdf>> (accessed 22 March 2001).

Providing students with a good start in open and distance learning

Elizabeth Manning, The Open University, UK

Introduction

The abstract for this paper asserts that 'all prospective students should be given a "good start" to their studies'. A number of questions underlie this assertion. What is meant by a 'good start'? Why the imperative? Is a good start something that all prospective students need? And how are the needs of individual students to be met in an institution, such as the British Open University, which caters for such large numbers?

These questions are considered here and put in the context of a recent decision by the Higher Education Access and Preparation for Open University Studies taskgroup (HEAPS) to update the University's Access and Preparation policy at a time of large-scale changes within the institution. The paper will also address some of the challenges affecting the drawing up, approval and implementation of this policy.

Some background

The existing Open University Access and Preparation policy was approved in 1995. It is significant how dated this document has become in a relatively short time.

Sewart (1979) has recorded the concern expressed in 1969 by the then Government Planning Committee about the preparation of students 'who are not at a stage when they could profitably pursue degree level studies', and it was even 'hoped' that the University would develop its own preparatory courses. This latter recommendation was not implemented, however, because it was felt at the time that it might jeopardise the University's standing as a provider of high-class university-level courses. The responsibility for preparing new students lay largely with their counsellor (subsequently, tutor-counsellor), to whom they were allocated a couple of months before the start of the course. This arrangement worked well, although, in retrospect, the concept of 'preparation' was considered at a more surface level than it is now. Students also had frequently to wait for several months before contact was made with their counsellor because early registration was necessary at that time to gain a place on their course. Referring new students to 'Return to Study' courses in other institutions was, and remains, an option but not always an ideal one. In 1985, when the majority of students were required to begin their studies with a foundation course, a set of course-specific preparatory materials for each foundation course were produced, followed by supporting materials for use by the tutor-counsellor. With these materials, tutor-counsellors were given clearer guidance on what 'preparation' involved. 'Induction', however, was not a concept that was addressed directly.

The situation has now almost turned full circle. As part of the institution's response to the Government's Widening Participation agenda, the OU, after thirty years, is now developing its own series of stand-alone preparatory courses: *Openings*. They no longer threaten the University's standing; indeed this bringing of new students 'up to speed' is a road that many universities are now taking. The student body has also changed significantly, which means that greater numbers have previous degree-level qualifications and are taking courses to

enhance their careers. They have clear goals and have confidence in what they are about to take on. With this change came the decision in 1993 to abolish the foundation course entry requirement as it was becoming inappropriate to the needs of this cohort of students. The traditional 'second-chance' OU student, however, still features strongly and remains core to the University's mission. Tutor-counsellors still currently – pending a review of the role of associate lecturers – support these students in the preparatory period, although as it will be seen below, this period is shrinking fast. The support for other new students is now provided through the regional student services network. One result of this has been the emergence of a generic induction programme which aims to provide new students on a wide range of courses with a formal welcome and an introduction to the University and distance learning.

The challenges

One of the biggest changes – and challenges – affecting the University in the context of preparation and induction is the increasing late registration of students. The Labour Government, in encouraging more students to participate in university education, is providing additional funding on the assumption that more students register. In an increasingly competitive world, it is becoming more of a challenge each year to find these students, which means that in the OU closing dates for registrations are put back closer and closer to the course start date. As a result, associate lecturers do not know exactly who their students are until much later, and it is certainly less feasible to offer a set programme of preparation and induction to new students two months before the course start date. (This, of course, assumes that two months is an appropriate period.) A significant number of new students thus are not able to engage with these activities at all. On the other hand, not all students register so late, and there remains a substantial cohort of new students who commit themselves several months ahead to a long wait. Coupled with this is the move towards greater flexibility whereby courses are beginning to be offered at different times in the year, and this makes the current provision even less practicable.

Another challenge, which is not new, concerns the size and complexity of the institution. Central academic units – and the course teams within them - who have traditionally produced preparatory units (for a relatively small number of courses) work independently of one another and in relative isolation from the regional centres where the contact with students lies. These materials have not always been a course team's top priority. The description, twenty years ago, of the system of preparation as a 'Cinderella service' still rings true today. The thirteen regional centres also have their own way of doing things. On the one hand this is entirely appropriate. (The situation in London is completely different, for example, from that in the Highlands and Islands in Scotland.) On the other hand, there is need now for consistency of provision, demanded by external professional bodies and quality agencies.

The complexity, however, extends further than the institution. The very nature of the student body, with all its disparity and differing needs, needs to be uppermost in any policy development. For a student-centred institution, the differing orientations of new students must also be taken into account. Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs (1981) refer to 'all those attitudes and aims that express the student's individual relationship with a course and the University'. Each student comes to the University with a different background, different expectations, different reasons for study and different concerns. All these individual orientations must somehow be taken into account.

The challenge therefore facing the HEAPS group has been to convince sections of the University who view such a proposed policy as something 'worthy' but 'totally out of context' in today's world that this is something worth doing. If it is to be implemented the new policy also has to be owned by different sections of the institution. One problem is providing evidence that preparing and inducting students actually makes a difference to retention. It is arguable that such evidence is impossible to find. There is no lack of student views about the level of helpfulness various preparatory and induction activities have been. There is no doubt that they value the contact with their tutor, which has been shown above, is become difficult to establish at an early enough time. Having gained the necessary support, HEAPS must thus produce a policy which is meaningful and flexible, mindful of the ongoing changes in the University, and which has relevance and is attractive to a very wide range of students.

So what is the case for providing students with a good start to their studies?

The case for providing a 'good start'

The OU is very well known in the UK, but many prospective students have still only a vague idea of what is entailed in studying with the University. For many applying to the University has been a big decision and the institution itself, with its open entry, has a responsibility to ensure that the decision is the right one. One potential student - not untypical of the 'second chance' student - understood recently that 'you work from home; you have to go to summer schools; it is based at Milton Keynes; you have a set tutor that you send work to and you watch television programmes'. Interestingly, she had specific questions which are all questions which are apposite for students from all kinds of backgrounds: how long would it take; how much would it cost; how does it work; when does it start, how much time would she need; what kind of support could she expect? When it came to what kind of course, she was less sure and replied 'something to do with history'. She also had little idea of what qualifications were offered - or had even considered them - and was not aware of open entry and was concerned whether she would be 'up to it'.

To provide this student with a good start, the University must make it very clear, at the appropriate time and in the most accessible medium, what is on offer and what she will be taking on. Once she has decided to register, is her choice of course what she thinks it is; is it at the appropriate level to her needs and experience; does she have the necessary skills to cope with it? Is she aware of not only how much study she will be doing each week, but what this means in practice? The new policy must not only address these issues but in addition, nearer to the start of the course, ensure that she is welcomed to the University so that she feels she 'belongs' and is thus studying in an atmosphere of safety. It must provide reassurance where necessary and a preliminary engagement with her course to whet her appetite and to give her an opportunity to identify which skills she might need to work on and then a chance to start developing them. No matter what a new student's background or previous educational qualifications, it is unlikely that he or she will appreciate what learning at a distance means (for the inexperienced student, what learning itself entails), the nature of the relationship with the tutor or what responsibilities he or she should have as a student. Time management strategies are also crucial to success and need to be drawn up in advance of the course start.

In order to cut through these complexities, HEAPS devised some broad working definitions. The concept of the 'good start' was divided into three different stages and types of activity, although it was recognised that there was an element of overlapping. It was clear, too, that because there was no common ownership, each area needed to have a 'home' if progress in implementation were to be made.

Access

In terms of the policy revision under discussion, 'access' has been taken as the information and advice provided to enquirers at the recruitment stage. HEAPS's remit is to focus on new students but the group recognises that there is relevance, too, to continuing students who are considering their next course. The aim here is to ensure that prospective students choose the right course at the right level. In an open entry system the freedom to choose can result in misjudgements or over-optimism. It thus has implications for those producing brochures, developing information websites and providing advice and guidance.

Clear, accurate information must therefore be provided, matching what the prospective student needs to know with what the University thinks they need to know. There is a tension here. How is he or she to discover more about the course itself? Course titles can be misleading in themselves. Currently prospective students are provided with brief descriptions of courses, although opportunities can also be offered for them to consult course materials. It is doubtful, however, whether browsing at a surface level at this early stage is very helpful and arguable that a degree of engagement is necessary in order to get a flavour of a course. The provision of taster materials has been the subject of long discussions. While there is a clear demand for taster materials from those providing advice and guidance and a positive response from those who consume them, they are not usually produced by the course team itself because of staffing, time and funding constraints. A cheaply produced series has therefore been successfully produced by one enterprising regional centre, but these materials are not officially recognised or their use sanctioned by the central academic unit.

Finding out about the course also necessitates an awareness of the level of that course. To this end, several course teams produce self-diagnostic materials. This has been seen to be particularly appropriate to language and mathematics courses, but there is increasing evidence of their wider use, as in the Master's level courses in the Arts. More problematic is the advice given to students, whose first language is not English and who are rightly concerned about their level of English.

Any policy concerning the access of new students needs to lay down standards for individual advice and guidance, including levels of accessibility, medium and impartiality. It is often appropriate to refer an enquirer elsewhere if the OU does not appear right at this particular stage in a student's career. The new *Openings* series, however, is proving to be a much-needed opportunity for inexperienced students before they go on to degree level study. In this, a course in the series also doubles as a tutor-supported preparatory course.

Preparation

'Preparation' moves on to the stage where the new student has now registered for a particular course. It involves the student in reaffirming that the course chosen is the right one. (If it is not, it is possible in the OU to withdraw before the course start date with no financial

penalty.) It also helps the student identifying the skills needed for successful and rewarding study, providing them with support to develop them, as well as optional background reading. The preparatory period has to be flexible, to take account of those who have registered early as well as those who leave the decision until the last minute.

The question of learning skills development at this early stage of a student's career is a tricky one. New students are often anxious about their ability to cope with the academic demands of the course, and wish to be 'taught' the skills they will need before the start of the course. Whatever support they are given now must not replace opportunities for continuing development as they engage with and reflect on the course materials as they progress from one level to the next.

It has become clear that preparation is course-specific and consequently the responsibility of course teams, but how might such provision be made without resulting in overstretching the already hard-pressed authors? HEAPS has revisited the Course Guide, which has traditionally been sent to students as part of their first course mailing. Course Guides currently fulfil a number of functions and they appear in a variety of formats. The group is recommending that the Course Guide be replaced, as each new course enters the curriculum, by a new version which is sent to all students when they register for the course. The recommendation will be that the Guide not only provides an overview of the course, with some short extracts to provide a 'taste' (sour as well as sweet), but also indicate what skills are assumed for successful study, including a diagnostic element where appropriate. Suggestions for preparation will be incorporated, which will be of particular value to those who register early. There is concern that this strategy risks that students will be overburdened with paper, and it will be important, if this proposal is accepted, to keep the pages to a minimum. These Course Guides could also be sent out on request to enquirers and replace the existing controversial and unofficial taster materials.

The establishing an early relationship between student and tutor is crucial. But this 'fledgling relationship' as described by Susan Tresman, Director of the OU's Retention Project, for the reasons described earlier, is becoming increasingly problematic. The sending out of preparatory units for certain first-level courses, with their accompanying formative assignments, is now almost unworkable. HEAPS does not want to see this opportunity lost and is recommending that any such provision now be embedded into the course itself to ensure consistency, so that students who register late are not disadvantaged.

Induction

Of the three areas, 'Induction' is most obviously aimed at the new student. As with Preparation, it is offered to students once they have formally registered for a course but near to the start of the course. This is where students are welcomed into the University and acquire generic studentship skills. Induction can be offered in a variety of ways: through face-to-face meetings, which are widely appreciated by those who attend, but which are not always possible for those, for example, who live at a distance from a particular centre. There is evidence, however, of students travelling great distances, to counter feelings of isolation and to get a feeling of belonging to the University. Students who cannot or who do not wish to attend a meeting need to be inducted in different ways. The sending out of a generic *Learning with the OU Starts Here* booklet has been well received, and a new web development will provide another item in the menu of opportunities from which students may

choose. Deakin University of Australia has developed a CDROM, *Off to a Flying Start*, the title of which captures the essence of induction as well as a flexible means of delivery. There is also opportunity to request support through an email facility through the CDROM, which will be mirrored through the OU's planned website.

Conclusion

In all these stages, it is important that all students are given the opportunity to benefit from what is offered, and it is the aim of the emerging new policy to identify a 'core' service which can be guaranteed.

Does a 'good start' make a difference? It may be difficult to prove that it makes a difference to retention, but it is clear that it leads to increased confidence and motivation. Taylor and Morgan (1986) have written about the key areas of confidence, competence and control in learning. Confidence and competence increase over time. These cannot be achieved in the period leading to the start of a course, but this is an important period in which to plant the seeds. The OU's new policy aims to meet the challenges described above, be achievable and meaningful to any student who joins the University for whatever reason.

References

- GRANGER, D and BENKE, M. (1998), Supporting students at a distance from inquiry through completion, in: C.C.GIBSON (ed.) *Distance Learners in Higher Education* (Madison, Wisconsin)
- LOCKWOOD, F. (1989), The evaluation of Open University preparatory packages, *Open Learning*, 14.2, p43-46
- THE OPEN UNIVERSITY (2000), *Courses Survey*
- THE OPEN UNIVERSITY (2000) *Plans for change 2000-2010*
- SEWART, D. (1979) A new look at the preparation of Open University Students, *Teaching at a Distance*, 15, pp15-20
- TAYLOR, L, MORGAN, A. and GIBBS, G. (1981), The 'orientation' of Open University foundation students to their studies, *Teaching at a Distance*, 20, p3-12
- UNIVERSITY OF DEAKIN, *Off to a flying start. Orientation program for distance education students, CDROM*

Competition or collaboration: future directions for distance education providers

**Louise McCall. Department of General Practice, Monash University. Australia.
Leon Piterman. Department of General Practice, Monash University. Australia.**

Developments in open and distance learning and advances in information technology have made access to knowledge and educational services around the world feasible. Currently providers of tertiary education have not been restricted to servicing the needs of students in their local geographic area and this has resulted in increased competition, between universities, for students.

Government funding no longer protects tertiary education hence it is increasingly subject to 'open market forces' and therefore competition. Thus the future of universities may be compromised by economic and social pressures; increased number of educational providers and competition between these; de-regulation of education; and reduced public funding. Over the last two decades, in Australia, there has been an increase in the number of major universities from eight to 42 (The University of Melbourne 2001). Will all of these institutions survive? Will some choose to specialise, while others regionalise or will some become corporate-based providers?

Monash University, situated in Melbourne Victoria, Australia, is 40 years old and one of Australia's largest universities in terms of student enrolments (45,000). Its future is in its ability to remain global. The term 'globalisation' has many meanings. It involves cross-border economic, social, technological exchange under the conditions of capitalism (Globalisation Guide.org, 2001). Monash University will build on established alliances with other education and training providers (Monash University, 1999). Currently Monash University has campuses in Malaysia, South Africa and centres in London and Florence. In addition the university has academic and research links with approximately 100 universities around the world. These collaborations provide the gateway to other markets, which would not have been available without the involvement of the collaborating institutions and in some cases governments.

In order to globalise Monash University is increasingly reliant upon its staff in faculties, schools and departments to identify collaborative opportunities, be innovative in the delivery and administration of high quality education. The Department of General Practice, in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at Monash University is actively engaged with promoting the globalisation of Monash University. This paper outlines three models of collaboration with other educational institutions. The objective of these collaborations was to further enhance the professional development of GPs both in Australia and overseas.

The Graduate Studies in Family Medicine program

The Graduate Studies program at the Department of General Practice evolved in response to the need to raise the standing of general practice as an academic discipline with the aim of both improving research output as well as providing a pool of academically trained general practitioners (GPs). Several university departments of general practice responded to this need

by creating Masters courses in general practice (McWinney IR 1997), (St George IM, Durham JA, Farry PJ and Murdoch JC 1994), (Smith LFP 1994). A 1993 survey revealed that 7 of 29 departments of general practice conducted Masters programs with an approximate total of 50 GPs enrolled at any one time (Smith LFP 1994). With the exception of New Zealand, these courses have remained on campus mode in their delivery.

The Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine at Monash University was developed in response to real and perceived needs for more flexible forms of delivery (Piterman L 1992), (Strasser R 1992). The timing of entry of the course onto the GP market seemed appropriate. Vocational registration was introduced in 1990, making it essential for Australian GPs to accumulate a minimum number of quality assurance points (both continuing medical education and practice assessment) in order to maintain their place on the register. Distance education provided a useful option because of its flexible nature and the lack of any requirement to give up surgery time and income earning potential in order to attend courses.

Course delivery for the Graduate Diploma/Masters is primarily in print form, supplemented by audiotapes, teleconferences and workshops, and are presented in a form, which was compatible with the learning styles of most 40-year-old GPs. Decisions regarding the extent to which the course should be electronically delivered have been influenced by considerations of the learners' uses of technology. Surveys conducted by the this department indicated that there seemed little point in investing in electronic delivery of materials for a generation of GPs who are not yet "switched on" to this mode of delivery.

The content and presentation were driven by educational objectives and not by technological considerations. The subject also had considerable input from GPs in their development, making this a course "by GPs for GPs". The teaching of general practitioners has often, in the past, been very influenced by specialists who see a different spectrum of illness, often in institutional settings.

Subject co-ordinators were appointed on a part-time sessional basis to take responsibility for authorship and course development. Academic, administrative and technical staff along with a student representative form the Graduate Studies Committee which meets bimonthly.

So far over 700 GPs have participated in the Graduate Studies program which has been the springboard for collaboration with other academic institutions and professional bodies. An evaluation of the first five years of operation of this program was published as a supplement to Australian Family Physician (Piterman L, Parer M., Schattner P, McCall L 2000a), (Piterman L, Parer M., Schattner P, McCall L 2000b), (Piterman L, Schattner P, Parer M, Laeurm E, McCall L 2000c), (Schattner P, Piterman L, Laeurm E, McCall L, Parer M 2000a), (Schattner P, Piterman L, Laeurm E, McCall L, Parer M 2000b), (Piterman L, McCall L 2000d), (Piterman L, McCall L 2000e).

Overseas markets

Over 60 students in the Family Medicine program reside permanently outside Australia. This has resulted in the expansion into overseas markets, although not a simple process as it requires strong well-trained local support staff. The strategic alliances with Hong Kong University (HKU) and Shajah University are described here.

At present we have a Copyright Licensing Agreement with HKU. Key to this agreement was a graduate of the Master of Family Medicine program, employed at this institution. This agreement uses a 'purchaser-provider' model and enabled HKU to include an existing Master of Family Medicine subject 'Community Geriatrics' as part of its postgraduate general practitioner curriculum. In return the Monash University received a set proportion of student fees. Monash University provided the course material and were responsible for the quality assurance of these. This course has not been modified for this new market or for face-to-face delivery. Empirical evidence has revealed (Lam TP 2000) that medical schools, whose curriculum primarily involves didactic teaching, are reluctant to pursue postgraduate medical education via distance. They are concerned that clinical skills cannot be adequately obtained via distance education. To this end the academic staff at HKU were responsible for teaching the material, student support and assessment of student academic performance. The 25 GPs who enrolled in the first intake of this course used the 'distance learning' materials as a study guide in on-campus tuition.

A second alliance has been established via negotiations with another graduate of the Masters in Family Medicine program. Early in 2001 Shajah University, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) invited our department to conduct a course, from the Family Medicine program, on Women's Health. Shajah University requested that two academic staff from our department conduct the first week of this fourteen-week distance education course in a face-to-face manner at their institution. This model represents the 'host-visitor model' as Monash University provides the product and service. The students completed the rest of the course via distance supplemented with videoconference tutorials. The Monash University staff returned to the UAE to examine the students at the end of the course. Twenty-five doctors participated in this course.

New course development and collaboration

Recognising that postgraduate medical education can be conducted by distance has resulted in interest in other medical departments at Monash and also at The University of Melbourne wishing to collaboratively develop structured courses for GPs. Such collaboration has resulted in the development of a Graduate Certificate and Masters in General Practice Psychiatry, offered for the first time in 1998.

General practice and psychiatry, as medical specialities, traditionally have a differing perspective of mental illness, derived from the environments in which they practice. The collaborators in this 'partnership' comprised members of four university departments and two professional colleges: the Departments of Psychiatry and General Practice from the University of Melbourne, and the Departments of Psychological Medicine and General Practice at Monash University, the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) and the Victorian Faculty of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). This group was drawn together to combine the experience of the universities, traditional providers of education, with the experience of the colleges whose role has traditionally been responsible for the setting of clinical standards. The input of all parties was essential to ensure the relevance of psychiatric clinical subject matter for GPs.

Although half of the students were enrolled at the University of Melbourne and the other half at Monash University the Management Committee decided to have a single point of contact for student administration issues as this was deemed to be most effective and efficient and

would avoid confusion on the part of the students. Staff from Monash University's Department of General Practice fulfilled these functions. These administration staff organised course advertising, answered enquires and enrolled students on behalf of the two universities. These staff needed to liaise with both universities on student selection criteria and enrolment processes and notify students and the University of Melbourne about marks, issues relating to fees and student graduation. The administrative staff at the Department of General Practice were also responsible for overseeing the course development, including the production of audio and videotapes, final printing, storage and dispatch of all materials, receipt and dispatch of student assignments (to and from the markers), organisation of teleconferences and residential weekends and all budgetary matters including payment of authors and affiliated course staff. So far 140 GPs have participated in this program.

Discussion

In today's business world companies collaborate to maximise profits and reach new markets (Herzog VL, 2001). Most collaborative ventures occur so that the parties can achieve a goal that they could not achieve alone (Lanier 1980). These models of collaboration show that the tertiary education sector is consolidating resources to maximise efficiencies in line with the trend of the industrialised world (Hames RD 1994). In participating these institutions eliminate duplicate costs in course development and delivery, and in doing so Monash University is assisted in its goal of globalisation.

The provision of CME for GPs is possible, as existing course material can be adapted to meet cultural needs of the overseas market. Off shore collaborations evolved from personal relationships with graduates of the Graduate Studies program. These ventures have taken substantial time to come to fruition. Key people were instrumental for the success of negotiations as they understood the learning needs of the GPs in their countries, were familiar with distance education and the content of the Monash Graduate Studies curriculum. The graduate located in the UAE was a fundamental resource in helping our staff to adapt the courseware to incorporate cultural issues pertaining to Women's health in the UAE. These staff embraced these new opportunities which resulted in enhanced job satisfaction. Participation in this collaboration enabled the Department of General Practice at Monash University to achieve the scale needed to cover fixed costs.

Strengths of this approach

The joint University/College collaborations enabled academic and administrative resources to be shared. The development of distance education programs is resource intense and the GP CME market is a niche market in contrast to other markets that providers of distance education institutions serve. Therefore the collaborations described in this paper have resulted in maximisation of resources. Monash University is now engaged in collaboration with another two international organisations. These institutions were able to afford to 'buy' the products that the Department of General Practice could deliver. HKU purchased the product without the service whilst Shajah University 'purchased' the product and academic support. Thus economic influences, coupled with attitudes towards distance education, determined their product requirements.

The success of these ventures has depended on effective communication, defined roles for individuals, the recognition of colleague's contribution to the team, cooperation and

collegiality and a high level of administrative support. In addition, all members of the collaborations had a genuine focus on improving the care of patients through enhanced GP training. This drive enabled participants to transcend short-term gains of individuals or organisations and to commit time and energy to these initiatives.

Conjoint planning meetings in the early stage of the collaborative arrangements overcame competition between the institutions, all involved in the provision of continuing medical education. The ventures were continually monitored and stakeholder feedback was incorporated to ensure the success and viability of the venture. The collaborations resulted in students experiencing a richer intellectual environment than if the course relied on one department, institution or discipline.

In relation to the General Practice Psychiatry program the alliance between the two universities and colleges provided the status to negotiate with government who could invest in this endeavour without favour. As an adjunct to this collaborative endeavour we have sought to further enhance inter-sectoral communication in Victoria in the area of mental health by the development of a formal alliance (Victorian Mental Health Alliance) between government, university and professional groups to further the cooperative development of GP psychiatry in Victoria. This has recently evolved into the Primary Health Care Advisory Committee which will report to State Government on a range of issues involving psychiatry in the general practice context.

These models of collaboration reveal aspects of the 'Innovative organisation' described by Knowles (1980). The parties were flexible and ready to change. Staff were prepared to take on new roles. The models were built on trust that resulted from open, honest communication (Herzog VL 2001). The leaders used power 'supportively' to foster and motivate the academic staff. There was interdependency as all involved shared resources. Decision-making was based on problem solving and open communication minimised conflict.

Problems with this approach

Success of these models has not been without problems. One of the greatest challenges for the General Practice Psychiatry program was to straddle parallel administrative processes in two universities whilst providing seamless communication and support to the students. Problems were mostly administrative based on the fact that the two universities each had different student selection, enrolment and administrative processes. Although there was academic goodwill there were administrative impediments which forbade the course being offered as a joint degree. To this end half the students were enrolled at each university, a process which identified differences in student selection which had to be overcome. One university required students to apply for enrolment with their credentials being tabled before a Faculty committee for consideration. The other institution considered all applicants as long as they met the course selection criteria. The procedures for payment of course fees and dates for enrolments, deferrals and student withdrawals also differed between the two institutions.

Through the initiative and commitment of those involved, these hurdles were successfully overcome and students were mostly shielded from any difficulty though the use of a single administration unit for student contact. Recognition of these problems has contributed to new policy formation by the Monash University Learning and Teaching Operational Plan Working Party (1999) for joint degrees and certificates. The *Cross-Institutional Programs*

document outlines a set of guiding principles and understandings needed to be developed to underpin cross-institutional relationships. Steps in this process include determining the choice of partner, equity of involvement of partners, core principles and monitoring processes and steps for formalising the cross-institutional program.

The integrators (Lawrence P and Lorsch J 1967) are the key people involved in negotiating the collaborations. At the Department of General Practice this person is a Professor and Director of Graduate Studies program, similar to a 'general manager' in business. This person is the one who has the established personal relationships with the key personal in the other institutions and had the authority to act on the Universities behalf. As the negotiations are held integrators' opportunities can be maximised rapidly and conflict resolved quickly. The sustainability of this relationship may be jeopardised if key people leave these institutions. Once the programs are operating the integrators allocate academic staff to coordinate and deliver the education.

As globalisation of the Department of General practice increases the organisation will change. As we expand, from the entrepreneurial state, with informal structures and family like culture that contributes to the current success, into a larger and more complex organisation, we may have to consider a new structures and processes to accommodate growth (Nadler DA and Tushman ML 1997). This structure will have to be balanced and avoid an 'inward focus and complacency', so as not to cease identifying new opportunities and listening to our students.

What will be the impact of globalisation on the quality of education? If globalisation of education increases and cost cutting becomes the norm will providers of tertiary education compromise the quality and flexibility to compete? Will education become 'export driven' resulting in education becoming a commodity with products or services? What are the ethical issues associates with this change? Alternatively the quality of programs may be enhanced as only the best may be in demand. Currently the 'Rules of free trade' insist that international corporations be treated equally with local companies. At present this does not apply to education – will these evolve? If not will poorer countries miss out on education from international providers or receive a lower quality product. The answer may rest on the economic circumstance of the countries involved and the importance they place on the education of their population.

Issues of access, equity and ethics may provide universities with a dilemma when considering their competitive strategy. Information technology enables more students to access education however they have to purchase the equipment. Thus the future of distance education may be limited to those who can afford the course fee and associated expenditure of purchasing, maintaining and upgrading technology. These costs may prohibit students from undertaking further education.

Will the future of education be solely conducted in English as the large international universities teach primarily in this language? Will this result in another issue for the access and equity debate? Universities using globalisation as a means of maximising resource allocation may be reluctant to provide a product in a 'native language' unless it is economically viable.

Ongoing collaboration

Opportunities have evolved a result of these collaborations. These would not have been made available if we worked alone. There is potential for collaboration in other identified areas of community need associated with specialist workforce shortages, for example, diabetes. To this end we are engaged in ongoing discussions about the potential of other courses being offered in Hong Kong and the UAE. New discussions with other graduates located in other countries around the world are in progress.

In addition to the formation of the Victorian Mental Health Alliance and the new policy formation for joint degrees and certificates these collaborations have resulted in a shared vision which overcame the boundaries of university, college or medical discipline. This vision includes education and research.

Research and publication opportunities between the institutions are evolving and are currently being conducted.

While there are many opportunities for these alliances there are also potential risks that may jeopardise the ongoing success of the collaboration. These partnerships are reliant on the ongoing commitment and energy of individuals, which could fade if they lose interest, feel burnt out or are overwhelmed by the opportunities.

As the Department of General Practice we are no longer restricted to the local market, and are now subject to increased pressure to compete with the numerous players on the global playing field. Will the future of global tertiary education follow a similar pattern of the business sector engaged in collaborations, partnerships and takeovers resulting in oligopolies or monopolies? For example BHP – is bigger better? Will our industry, particularly the distance education sector, mirror the collapse of the information technology sector? Or will the future follow a path of decentralisation and self-organisation? This paper poses more questions than answers but the future of distance education is shaped by these considerations. What path will your institution take?

Conclusion

The Graduate Studies program at the Department of General Practice at Monash University is responding to competition and external threats to its survival using collaboration. In doing so it promotes the future of Monash University in globalisation. The collaborations described in this paper have provided enhanced learning and teaching opportunities for students and strengthened the profile and standing of all parties by building on each other's strengths. The alliances have resulted in collaborative research, enhanced job satisfaction for the staff involved whilst reducing the costs of courseware development and delivery.

The future looks promising for the growth of the global Monash University but will no doubt be influenced by the free market forces which shape a global education environment.

References

Globalisation Guide.org. (2001). What is globalisation? (Vol. 2001), <http://www.globalisationguide.org/01.html>. 30.04.01.

- HAMES RD. (1994). *The Management Myth*. Business and Professional Publishing. Sydney.
- HERZOG VL. (2001). Trust building on corporate collaborative project teams. *Project Management*, March, pp. 28-37.
- KNOWLES MS. (1970, 1980.). *The modern practice of adult education; andragogy versus pedagogy*. Association Press. New York.
- LAM TP. (2000). Discussions pertaining to GP CME via distance education (personal communication).
- LANIER, J. (1980). Collaboration sessions, discussant remarks. In Hall GE, Hoard S, & Brown G (Eds.), *Exploring issues in teacher education: Questions for future research*. pp. 405-410. University of Texas. Austin.
- LAWRENCE P, and LORSCH J. (1967). *Organisation and environment*. Irwin. Homewood, IL.
- McWINNEY IR. (1997). *A textbook of family practice*. (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. New York.
- MONASH UNIVERSITY. (1999). *Leading the way*. Monash University. Melbourne.
- MONASH UNIVERSITY LEARNING AND TEACHING OPERATIONAL PLAN WORKING PARTY FOR JOINT DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES. (1999) *The Cross-Institutional Programs*. Monash University. Melbourne.
- NADLER DA, and TUSHMAN ML. (1997). *Competing by design: the power of organisational architecture*. Oxford University Press. New York
- PITERMAN L. (1992). A Graduate Diploma in Family Medicine. *Medical Journal of Australia*, Vol 157, pp. 178-181.
- PITERMAN L, PARER M., SCHATTNER P, and McCALL L. (2000a). Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 1 Conceptualisation and development. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 29:2-6.
- PITERMAN L, PARER M., SCHATTNER P, and McCALL L. (2000b). Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 2. Student characteristics, program characteristics, administration and future direction. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 7-13
- PITERMAN L, SCHATTNER P, PARER M, LAEURM E, and McCALL L. (2000c). Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 3. Assessment of and feedback to students at a distance. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 14-18.
- PITERMAN L, and McCALL L. (2000d). Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 6. Evaluation of a core subject within the Graduate diploma/Masters in Family Medicine – Principles of General Practice. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 30-37.
- PITERMAN L, and McCALL L. (2000e). Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 7. Evaluation of the Graduate diploma in Family Medicine: does a distance education course for GPs influence their reported clinical and professional practice? *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 38-41.
- SCHATTNER P, PITERMAN L, LAEURM E, McCALL L, and PARER M. (2000a) Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine. Part 4. Supervision of family medicine research at a distance: a formative evaluation. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 19-25.
- SCHATTNER P, PITERMAN L, LAEURM E, McCALL L, and PARER M. (2000b) Distance Education: Experience of the first 5 years of a Graduate Diploma/Masters in Family Medicine.

Part 5. Family medicine research at a distance: guidelines for supervisors. *Australian Family Physician*, Vol 29. Suppl 1. pp. 26-29.

SMITH LFP. (1994). Higher professional training in the general practice: provision of Masters degree course in the United Kingdom in 1993. *British Medical Journal*, Vol 308, pp. 1679-1682.

ST GEORGE IM, DURHAM JA, FARRY PJ, and MURDOCH JC. (1994). A Masters degree by distance education: the MGP (Otago). *New Zealand Family Physician*, Vol 21, pp. 134-137.

STRASSER R. (1992). A Masters degree in Family Medicine. *Medical Journal of Australia*, Vol 156, pp. 178-181.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE. (2001). Links to other universities (Vol. 2001) <http://www.unimelb.edu.au/links/#aust>.

Monash University. (1999). Leading the way. Monash University. Melbourne.

Support for culturally diverse post-basic students who receive telematic education at the Department of Nursing Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Salomé Meyer, Department of Nursing Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Introduction

The Department of Nursing Science of the University of Pretoria presents post-basic programmes by means of Telematic broadcasts. We make use of technology in the form of video presentations and interactive group discussions. This makes further education more accessible to professional nurses. At this stage approximately 50% of all the Telematic students live in rural areas, in a radius of approximately 400km from the Medical campus.

When planning for student support a number of factors have to be considered which influences the manner in which student support is addressed. Some of these factors are:

- ◆ The students come from different provinces of the country and therefore from different cultural groups.
- ◆ The average age of the students is in the vicinity of 40 years.
- ◆ The programmes are presented in English and that is not necessarily the mother tongue of the majority of students.
- ◆ Students registered for the programmes have been educated in the previous education system where content was lectured and technology did not play a big role.

The approach currently being used by the Department, as well as the University, is one of flexible learning and outcomes-based education. This requires an extensive support program from the lecturers and the University.

This paper will address the cultural diversity of the students who attend courses by means of Telematic broadcasts, as well as the strategies put into place to support the students in this unfamiliar delivering mode of the learning content.

Culture

There are many definitions available for the concept culture, such as: “culture is a way of life, handed on from generation to generation, providing human beings with a design for living” (Lewis in Price and Cortis 2000: 236). Another definition found in Lewis and Price (200:236) by Leininger states that culture is: “the learned and shared beliefs and values and life ways of a designated or particular group, which are generally transmitted intergenerationally and influence one’s thinking and action modes”.

The students following courses by means of Telematic broadcast are all definitely very different. They differ in the sense that they come from a variety of ethnic groups. This is not only a matter of white and black. Cultural diversity is however not the mere difference of people regarding their ethnicity. It goes far beyond that. It is matter of race, language, sexual preference, gender, geographic placement, and many more. The list can be as long as the amount of differences that we can think of.

When addressing differences, one has to address similarities as well. Students registering for distance programmes/courses at the Department of Nursing Science at the University of Pretoria are all people who have completed their training as a professional nurse. This is not the only aspect they have in common. They are all adult students. Nearly all of them are full-time employees, and have families. They are all off-campus students. Nearly 80% of them have to travel quite a distance to the nine different centres where broadcasts are received.

Regarding previous learning, they have all been educated according to the traditional method in both school and during their basic training as professional nurses. All levels of education in South Africa are currently done according to the Outcomes-based method. This is unfamiliar territory for all of these students.

They have to adjust to being in a multi-cultural class. During the era of apartheid these students went to different schools. Now they are all sitting in the same classroom and they have to attain cultural competence. They not only have to adjust to this new approach to education, but also to the aspect of distance as well as technology.

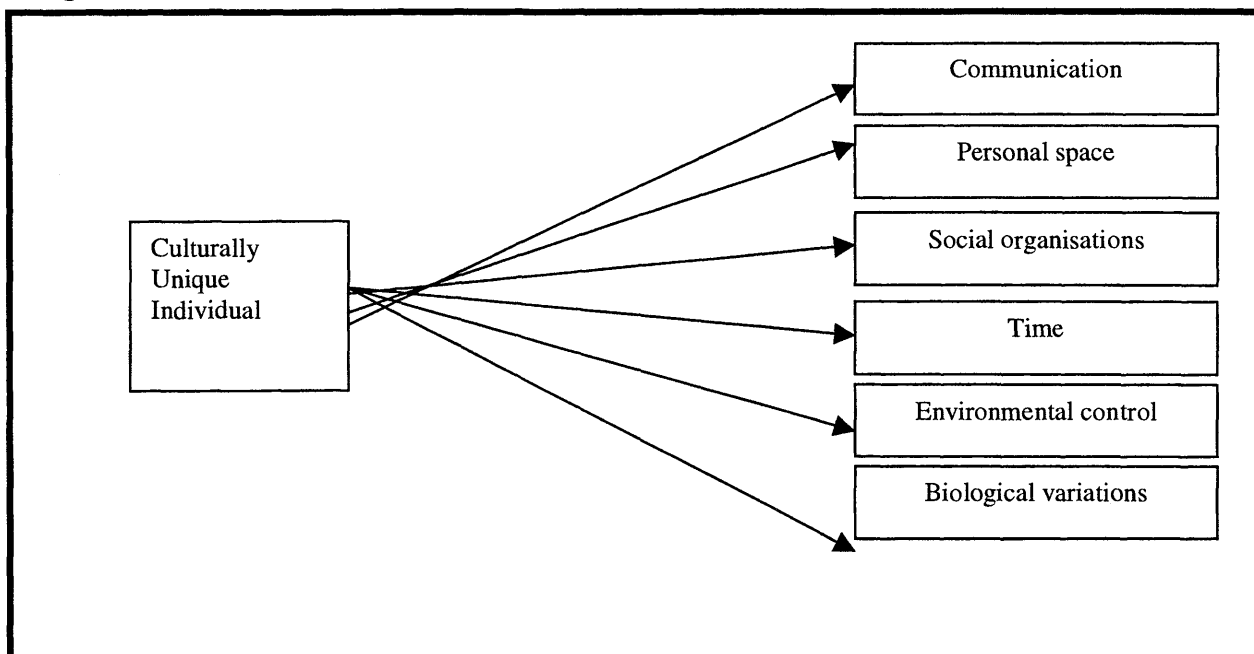
In a classroom of students who participate in a distance education programme by means of Telematic broadcast, none might belong to homogeneous population groups, but all share a common experience (Price & Cortis 2000:237). It is therefore important that lecturers should realise the diversity of the students, and that the students should realise the commonness of their learning experiences.

Individuals are unique in many ways. Figure 1 describes the culturally unique individual (Giger and Davidhizar in Bastable 1997: 187). Students in a classroom should consider these unique characteristics of individuals to obtain cultural competence. Purnell and Paulanka in Price and Cortis (2000:239) proposes that a culturally competent approach should involve the following:

1. Developing an awareness of one's own existence
2. Demonstrating knowledge and understanding of other people's nature
3. Accepting and respecting cultural differences
4. Adapting

Cultural awareness is a conscious process. If the students can accomplish accepting each other and adapting to a situation that is unfamiliar, the same can be expected from the lecturer. Lecturers have to support student learning (Distance 2000:116). This aspect will be discussed further on.

Figure 1: Six Cultural Phenomena



Technology in distance education

In the traditional on-campus situation technology is used to support teaching and learning, but in distance education, technology is used to deliver the course (Billings 1996:263). A distance-learning programme has unique challenges related to the characteristics of students and the geographic distance between lecturers and students (Coleman, Smith, Alexy & Palmer 2001:9). The use of technology is a significant means to increase access to adult education. This is the case at the University of Pretoria. Each school of nursing needs to explore its own needs and resources to determine how and to what extent it can deliver education via distance technology (Distance 2000:117).

It is known that there is no great difference in educational outcomes between the traditional and distance education methods (Distance 2000:118). There is evidence that students learn via distance education as well as they do with traditional methods (Armstrong, Gessner & Cooper 2000:63). What should however be considered is the level of skill of students regarding the use of technology. This may cause some discomfort to students. The discomfort may however also be due to cultural differences.

The following experiences of discomfort regarding members of the class group have been identified by Eliason and Raheim (2000:163):

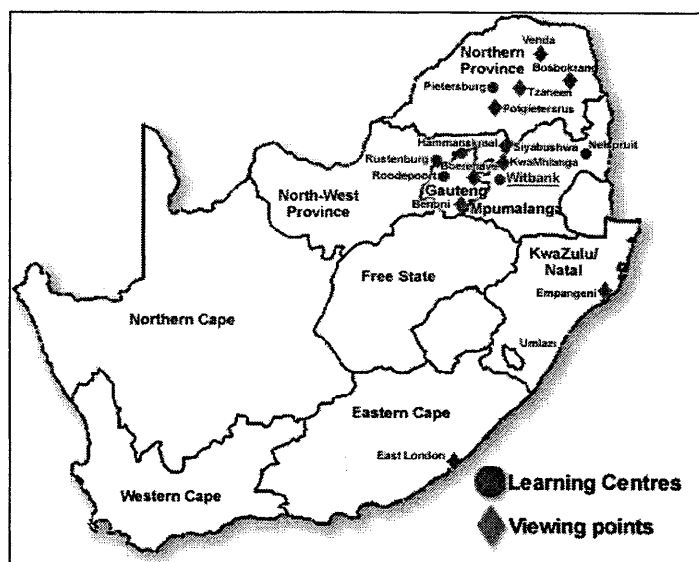
1. Discomfort caused by a lack of knowledge, skills or exposure
2. Discomfort caused by disapproval or negative attitudes
3. Discomfort as a result of feeling threatened
4. Discomfort caused by feelings of guilt, sympathy, or pity

Experiences 1-3 may also be taken into account regarding the experience of the students due to the technology being employed. The teaching method being followed is a first time experience for nearly all students who register for the Telematic courses. They are used to

having a lecturer addressing them in person in front of the class. They are used to ask questions as often as they like. This technological approach might even make the students feel bewildered, as their whole learning environment has been re-structured.

The use of video technology for distance education became popular because it provides more of the traditional classroom “feel” as the lecturer can be seen on screen, and the students are able to communicate with the lecturer by means of audio interaction (Armstrong et al 2000:64). Currently one-way pre-recorded video, one-way video and two-way audio is used. Six subjects/courses are being televised by means of satellite television. Those students, who have access at their homes to this type of technology, are able to watch broadcasts from home and contact the lecturer by means of the telephone. Nine viewing centres, in three provinces (see figure 2), are available to students who are not able to watch broadcasts from home.

Figure 2: Map of South Africa indicating viewing points



The lecturer is in the Telematic studio during the broadcast. She introduces the video and has a short discussion with students regarding the content. The video is then shown and afterwards the students may ask questions by making a phone call. The lecturer then repeats the question, as students at the other centres cannot hear the question, before she answers it. It is however required of students to come to the broadcasts prepared. They should have gone through the learning content, read articles, textbooks and used other prescribed and supportive material to enable them to follow the broadcast and add to their preparation. This issue will be addressed further on in the paper.

Skilled lecturers

Lecturers might not have the luxury of deciding what medium of delivery system to use, but they should consider that the course outcomes must be met, regardless of the medium employed (Armstrong et al 2000:66). A successful model for designing interactive education was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Extension (Armstrong et al 2000:67). It consists of four steps:

1. Humanising the medium: this has to do with the creation of a friendly and good learning environment (Armstrong et al 2000:67)

2. Getting learners to participate: the lecturer has to use the capabilities of the delivery system to engage the learners (Armstrong et al 2000:68)
3. Use the right message style: highlighting important information, repetition, memorable visuals etc. (Armstrong et al 2000:67)
4. Getting feedback to and from the learners: during and after the presentation (Armstrong et al 2000:67)

Student interaction is a problem. A major concern for the lecturer is the ability to “connect” with the student (Yucha 1996:2). It is therefore essential that lecturers receive training in distance teaching methods. The teaching method that will really make students fall asleep is the “talking head”.

Lecturers concerned with Telematic Education at the Department of Nursing attended a course in Television Presentation in March 2001. This was unfortunately only after they have already been presenting courses by means of Telematic broadcast since 1996. The programmes are still being presented and due to the training the lecturers now have future products that will be of a better quality.

When taping a video or doing live broadcasts the following should be kept in mind:

Appearance of lecturer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Neat and relaxed ◆ Minimal jewellery ◆ No spectacles if possible ◆ Wear colours that suit your complexion ◆ Preferably no stripes, dots or flowers ◆ Dark skin: lighter colours close to face ◆ Light skin: colours close to face should not be too light
Preparation of lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Thorough planning and structuring of lesson ◆ Identify core ideas ◆ Content should be attractive and keep students captive ◆ Use slide shows such as MS PowerPoint ◆ Video inserts ◆ Graphics, tables, charts or real photographs
Presentation of lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Look comfortable and relaxed, it should be a natural situation ◆ Speak to students as if they are there with you in the studio ◆ Do not talk in a monotone voice ◆ Pause from time to time to enable students to think about what has just been said ◆ Ask questions and let them think about it for a minute ◆ Anticipate questions and address them ◆ Use many examples and give explanations ◆ Use clear and concise language ◆ Promote the idea of forming study groups

Student support

Student support commences the moment marketing of a programme starts. The marketing material should be complete and attractive and contain details such as:

- ◆ Costs and duration of courses
- ◆ Registration dates and venues of registration and broadcast
- ◆ Contact information
- ◆ Details concerning the different subjects, such as the combinations thereof to register a qualification

Course material such as study guides/work books and readers/compendia should be complete by the time the students register. It is very important that the students understand how to use the course material. Lecturers must be present during the registration day to answer questions students may have. An orientation day on how to use study material and approach the Telematic broadcasts must also be held. Lecturers of the Department travel to the four main centres where students can attend these days. This means students have four opportunities to attend.

“Given the inevitability of technology failure, an available backup system is imperative” (Penney et al 1996:35). Copies of all pre-taped videos are sent to the different viewing centres. The reason for this is that students will not miss a broadcast due to some technical problems that may occur at the studio. At the different centres they have a video machine, a television set and the videotape available for that day. Administrative facilitators are available at the different centres that will assist students during broadcasts. These administrative facilitators serve as the go-between for the lecturers and students.

An information document is compiled that contain the information the student will need throughout their time of study. This document serves as a communication instrument between lecturers and students. The facilitators at all the viewing points receive information documents as well. This will inform them regarding the dates that the students write tests and examinations and inform them regarding the deadlines for the submission of assignments.

Innovative ways of communicating between lecturer and students can be the following:

- ◆ Courier services
- ◆ E-mail – for those students who are computer literate
- ◆ Faxing

The information document should contain the following:

- ◆ A note of welcome and good wishes for their studies
- ◆ Dates of broadcasts for specific courses/subjects
- ◆ Dates and scopes for test and examinations
- ◆ Contact information of lecturers (office numbers, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail address)
- ◆ Contact times of lecturers
- ◆ Contact days in the form of a block (where problems they experience can be discussed)
- ◆ Contact information regarding administrative problems
- ◆ Study hints

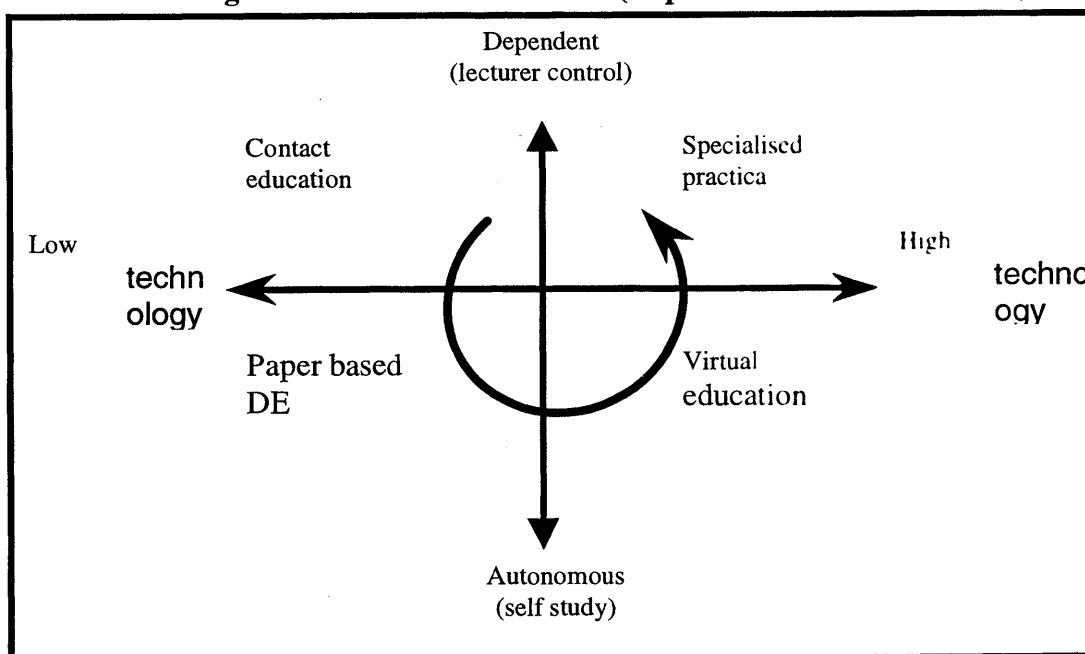
The contact/block day that is organised for the students serves as an opportunity for them to make personal contact with students. The lecturers travel to the four main venues where students receive broadcasts once a semester. On that specific day students are then invited to discuss problems they experience with content or otherwise concerned with their studies. The lecturers also explain to students how to approach certain content or even how to approach the tests and examinations.

5. Flexibility in distance education:

Institutions that devote resources to educational technologies are able to meet student demands for flexibility in education (Distance 2000:116). The advantage of distance education includes convenience and flexibility. The disadvantage of student isolation is overcome with the face-to-face block days that are planned for their time of study. Unfortunately this delivery mode is not suited to the learning style of all students.

The Department for Telematic Learning and Education Innovation at the University of Pretoria promotes the concept and model of a flexible learner (see figure 3). This implies that a specific programme/course should accommodate students at different levels of being skilled in the use of technology. The Department of Nursing Science strives to accommodate students, who study by means of the distance education model by providing for the dependant as well as the independent learner, as well as the learner who is skilled with the use of technology, and those who are less skilled.

Figure 3: The flexible learner (Department for TLEI at UP)



Final word

It is important that students in a distance-learning programme should receive support in the aspects as mentioned above. The question however is whether or not all students benefit by this delivery mode. The author is of the opinion that it is not. Some students will benefit only from a continuous contact situation, where others do not need contact with the lecturer and are able to continue with their studies, and do well, completely on their own. It is therefore extremely important to assess whether or not a proposed distance education programme is viable, cost-effective and satisfactory for both student and lecturer.

Sources

- Armstrong, M.L., Gessner, B.A. and Cooper, S.S. 2000. POTS, PANS, and PEARLS : The Nursing Professions's Rich History with Distance Education for a New Century of Nursing. *The Journal of Continuing Nursing Education*, vol. 31, no. 2, March/April.
- Bastable, S.B. 1997. *Nurse as Educator: Principles of Teaching and Learning*. Jones and Bartlett Publishers: Sudbury, Massachusetts.
- Billings, D.M. 1996. Distance Education in Nursing: Adapting Courses for Distance Education. *Computers in Nursing*, vol. 14, no. 5, 262-266.
- Coleman, R.B., Smith, M., Alexy, B. & Palmer K. 2001. Distance Education: A Decade of Distance Education: RN to BSN. *Nurse Educator*, vol. 26. no. 1, January/February, 161-164.
- Distance Technology in Nursing Education: Assessing a New Frontier. 2000. American Association of Colleges of Nursing. *Journal of Professional Nursing*. Vol. 16, no. 2, March-April, 116-122.
- Eliason, M.J. 2000. Experiences and Comfort with Culturally Diverse Groups in Undergraduate Pre-Nursing Students. *Journal of Nursing Education*, vol. 39, no. 4, April, 161-164.
- Penney, N.E., Gibbons, B. & Bushy, A. 1996. Partners in Distance Learning: Project Outreach. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, vol. 26, no. 7/8, July/August.
- Price, K.M. & Cortis, J.D. 2000. The way forward for transcultural nursing. *Nurse Education Today*, vol. 20, 233-243.
- Yucha, C.B. 1996. Interactive Distance Education: Improvisation Helps Bridge the Gap. *Journal of Bio-communication*, vol. 23, no.1, 2-7.

Distance higher education and library services in Japan

Chieko Mizoue
Lifelong Learning Research Centre
University of Library and Information Science, Japan

Introduction and purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between distance higher education in Japan and library services.

The nature of education in Japan has been changing due to the following circumstances:

- a) Because of advances in the telecommunications field, the knowledge and skills that people learn at school quickly become obsolete.
- b) Excessive emphasis on individual educational background, with the labor practices of lifetime employment and once-a-year recruitment of new university graduates, in Japan, has had serious adverse effects. The number of adult students is still very small, although the labor practices and recruitment system is changing and the number of adult students is gradually increasing.
- c) Since declining birthrates have led to a decrease in the number of 18 year olds, more attention is now being paid to older learners, including distance education that would suit a variety of learners at different stages of life.

Currently, it is necessary for Japanese universities and colleges to create a "lifelong learning" society. This means a society where people can freely take advantage of learning opportunities at any stage of life, and, where their learning achievements will be adequately evaluated.

Much research concerning the technology needed to carry out distance education has been conducted in Japan, focusing on the so-called "hard facets" of the issue. However, the quality of educational services, what is called the "soft facets," has been given scant attention.

While distance learners are less able to come in person to universities and colleges, and may obtain necessary information through internet and computer networks, study at universities and colleges requires a student to fully utilize university library services. Some library services may be inaccessible to the distance learner.

I will briefly examine distance higher education in Japan, and the relationship between students, university libraries, and public libraries. Finally, I will suggest that university libraries should forge links with public libraries to enable more effective distance education.

A Brief History of Distance Higher Education in Japan

Before World War II, some Japanese universities published lecture notes intended for adult learners who were not regular students. These lecture notes were reportedly very popular and

many adult learners studied them by themselves, even though universities did not provide any educational services or guidance for them.

The School Education Law was enacted in 1947. This law established official university correspondence courses. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education carried out drastic reform of the higher education system. In 1950 some universities such as Keio University and Bukkyo University formally established correspondence courses.

Currently there are ten junior colleges, 20 universities, and six graduate schools offering distance higher education. Approximate 240,000 students are categorized as regular students. In addition, there are several categories of non-degree students. For example, in the case of the University of the Air, there are one-year non-degree students, one-semester non-degree students, research students, and special auditors.

The University of the Air is the largest distance higher educational institution in Japan. Learning materials are offered only through broadcast and printed materials. Student enrollment in broadcast lectures began at this university in 1985, and currently about 85,000 students are enrolled.

Japan's University of the Air modeled itself upon the Open University in U.K. In 1967, the Social Education Committee established by the Japanese Ministry of Education researched the use of television and FM radio for specialized educational broadcasts, reporting its findings in 1969. At that time, many television stations had begun to operate in the UHF band. The Japanese Government wanted to use this new television wave as an educational tool, since the idea of "life-long education" which UNESCO advocated had become popular.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication jointly officially established the University of the Air. In 1981 the University of the Air Foundation was established as a running organization of the University. In 1983, the Minister of Education granted permission for the establishment of the University.

The University of the Air needs an enormous technological system, since its lectures are delivered entirely via broadcast. However, more recently communications technology, such as teleconference systems and computer networks, enabled universities and colleges to deliver distance education without an enormous technological system. In 1998, the Ministry of Education decreed that not only correspondence course students but also regular students could obtain college credit through the distance learning method. The maximum number of credits permissible earned through distance education for a regular student attending a four-year university is currently 60 credits.

Subsequently, the Ministry permitted master course distance programs in 1998. By the year 2000, we had six graduate schools offering such programs. The University of the Air will begin offering master course programs in 2002.

Correspondence Courses and Library Services

Students using a library do the following:

- a. Search for materials using indexes and bibliographic data

- b. Search using catalogues
- c. Consult the reference department when not sure of how to proceed
- d. Borrow materials, sometimes using inter-library loan services
- e. Photocopies library materials

In the past, students could not utilize these services without physically going to a library. Recently, some of these services are available through Internet and can be accessed at home. For example, some students can borrow or arrange for photocopying services by mail, but in many cases in Japan, the students must come to the library in person for such services. Concerning search services, if the materials are not digitalized, it is necessary to come to the library.

Although correspondence courses in Japan have a long history, there is little research concerning the relationship between correspondence courses and library services. People in higher education, in general, have regarded the primary role of university libraries to be for research, not for education. Since this thinking is still prevalent, faculty and staff do not take into consideration library services for correspondence course students who do not frequently visit university campuses.

Public libraries also have not been interested in the specialized studies of adult learners who are learning through correspondence courses. Rather, public libraries have catered to the non-academic library user.

In the case of Chuo University, however, a large private university, the university selects one institution from each prefecture, for example a public library, private university library, or professional college, and donates several hundreds books which are essential for correspondence study. This collection is called "TSUKYO BUNKO," which means a collection for correspondence study²².

Bukkyo University, a private university, has a borrow-by-mail service, although few students take advantage of this service, because either the mail charge is expensive, and/or the materials may not arrive promptly²³. However, most Japanese universities require correspondence students come to the library directly to access library services. Due to this inconvenience, many distance education students use the other libraries when they need materials.

One study showed that "using public libraries" and "buying necessary books by oneself" are highest when students need to write a report. When the students of Bukkyo University needed to write a report, 38.3% of correspondence students went to public libraries, and 5.2% went to other libraries, in 1978. At Keio University, in 1978, 64.5% of correspondence students used public libraries; the average rate of use of public libraries in Japan at that time was 4.7%²⁴.

²² MATSUMOTO, T. (1981) "TSUKYO-BUNKO" at the Correspondence Course of Chuo University, *TOSHOKAN-ZASHI*, 75 (11), pp.686-687. Some other universities have this system.

²³ MARSUMURO, T. and KAWASAKI, H. (1982) Distance Learners and Library, *TOSHOKAN-KAI*, 34 (1), pp.33-51.

²⁴ *Ibid.* and FUJIBE, A. (1979) Public Libraries and Correspondence Course Students, *Library and Information Science*, 17, pp.183-211.

However, public libraries do not meet the demands of university students well. Most public libraries do not possess a collection of specialized books in academic fields.

According to Matsui (1990), 198 titles, or over 40%, of reference books required for the teacher certificate correspondence course program were not in three public libraries in one city.

The University of the Air and Library Services

The University of the Air's academic program consists of classes broadcast over television and radio, printed course materials, guidance by mail, and classroom instruction and examination for credit at study centers. Broadcast classes are provided from 6:00 am until 12:00 midnight every day. Program scheduling is arranged flexibly to allow students to tune in at their convenience.

Library services of the University of the Air were initially different than those of other correspondence courses. The original target area, which included only the greater metropolitan Kanto region, had six Study Centers in 1985 at the onset of the academic year. The Study Centers began to offer face-to-face instruction and credit certificate examinations. At the same time, they were planning to offer academic counseling and guidance, opportunities to listen to or view the broadcast programs, and library services. The University Library, located at headquarters in Chiba City, is a comprehensive library. Smaller libraries attached to the Study Centers are utilized by students; students can access the books and journals that are in the University Library in Chiba through the Study Center library. In 1985, each Study Center library had approximately 6,000 books and 50 varieties of magazines and journals²⁵. In 2001, there were 343,249 books at all Study Centers and 71 magazines at the main 6 Study Centers, and 596,252 books and 1,376 magazines at all libraries of the University²⁶.

The original target area has seen enormous expansion with the help of the Communication Satellite System (CS) launched in 1998. Although not every Study Center is located in a national university, students can access libraries attached to national universities in which Study Centers are located. In addition to this, some students can access libraries where the University of the Air makes an agreement with national/private universities for their study.

It is clear that there are not enough books and magazines for students in their specialized fields. However, students can access other university libraries.

At the very beginning, staff of the University of the Air hoped public libraries would cooperate since students in other correspondence courses often used public libraries²⁷. However, no special collections for University of the Air students have been established at any public library, even though some public libraries make available all printed material for television and radio programs of the University.

²⁵ KONDO, K (1985) The University Library and Guidance at the University of the Air, *TOSHOKAN-ZASHI*, 79 (4), pp.202-204.

²⁶ UNIVERSITY OF THE AIR, (2001) *Outline of University of the Air 2001*, p.2.

²⁷ KONDO, K (1985) *ibid.*

The relationship between the University and public libraries should be strengthened.

The Case of The University of Library and Information Science

The University of Library and Information Science (ULIS), the smallest national 4-year university in Japan, was established in 1979. While it can be said that the university is rather new, it has a tradition dating back eighty years to its origins as a college for librarians.

In 2000, the university established the Graduate School of Information and Media Studies for doctoral students and opened a satellite office in Tokyo, one hour by train from its main Tsukuba campus. At the satellite office, some professors teach classes, while others teach classes by teleconference system from Tsukuba. One specific aim of the university was to accept adult learners, especially incumbent librarians and incumbent workers in the information industry.

Table 1: Enrollment in the graduate schools of ULIS in 2001

	Master's program	Doctoral program
Main campus only	72	45
Main campus and satellite office	34	0
Satellite office only	7	0
Total	113	45

Table 1 shows the enrollment of the Graduate School by location. "Main campus only" means that the graduate students study at the Tsukuba Campus only. These are full time students and some adult learners who live or work near the Tsukuba campus. "Main campus and satellite office" means that the graduate students sometimes study and take a class in Tsukuba depending on the subject. In many cases, the students go to the Tsukuba campus to take intensive classes or to take a few classes once a week. "Satellite office only" means that the students study at the satellite office only, and they do not go to the Tsukuba campus to attend classes.

While "satellite office only" students are very few, they need library services to study within their specialties. ULIS gives equal library services to all students. Therefore, all students come to the university library to access services, although some services, for example, OPAC, may be accessed via home computer. Book borrowing and inter-library loan services, however, are only available to students to come in person to the library.

The library services provided by ULIS are typical rather than rare. We should examine what services both university and public libraries should offer distance learners.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Currently, not only distance education institutions but also traditional universities and colleges offer distance education services to a growing number of enrollees.

Most university libraries should extend their hours and the goals of library services, not only as a social service but also as an educational service for adult distance learners. If many universities providing distance education courses make their library services available to their communities, distance learners will have access to library services anywhere. This means reciprocal utilization in the field of library services.

Universities should also form a close relationship with public libraries. Public libraries should give priority to the needs of distance learners to the extent possible. While it is impossible for each public library to build a collection in all fields of distance education courses from a physical or financial point of view, public libraries could have complementary roles; for example, one public library maintains a collection of economics books and another has a collection of titles in political science. This coordination of efforts will also save money that would be wasted if libraries in the same area were purchasing the same books. Also it helps distinguish the public libraries by virtue of their specialization.

In Japan, we need to shift the discussion away from purely technological problems of distance education to educational services for students, including the relationship between universities and other libraries.

References

- FUJIBE, A. (1979) Public Libraries and Correspondence Course Students, *Library and Information Science*, 17, pp.183-211.
- KONDO, K (1985) The University Library and Guidance at the University of the Air, *TOSHOKAN-ZASHI*, 79 (4), pp.202-204.
- MARSUMURO, T. and KAWASAKI, H. (1982) Distance Learners and Library, *TOSHOKAN-KAI*, 34 (1), pp.33-51.
- MATSUI, I. (1990), Students of Correspondence Courses, *TOSHOKAN-KAI*, 42(3), pp.206-214
- MATSUMOTO, T. (1981) "TSUKYO-BUNKO" at the Correspondence Course of Chuo University, *TOSHOKAN-ZASHI*, 75 (11), pp.686-687.
- MINAI, H (2000) Issues of Library Services and Distance Learning in: Japan AudioVisual Education Association ed. *Research Report of Lifelong Learning with New Technology*.
- MORI, T. (1987) Students and Library Services in the University of the Air, *GENDAI-NO-TOSHOKAN*, 25(1), pp.50-56.
- UNIVERSITY OF THE AIR, (2001) *Outline of University of the Air 2001*, p.2

The evaluation of tutor support in a distance learning institution

Godfrey Netswera
Senior Researcher
Technikon, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This institutional research project, "The evaluation of tutor support" was part of a larger project, the implementation of the Integrated Learner-Centered Distance Education ILCDE Model at Technikon Southern Africa (TSA). Tutor support is just one of the elements of the ILCDE model. This project, which followed a qualitative design, was conducted amongst tutors and tutor managers in TSA's decentralized centres with the intent to evaluate the success of the implementation of the tutor support.

INTRODUCTION

Technikon Southern Africa, the second largest distance education institution and the only distance Technikon in South Africa, had student numbers of 27 000 in 1990 and 85 000 in 1995. This speedy rise in student numbers in the later quarter of the 1980's to the earlier quarter of the 1990's with learners scattered throughout Southern Africa saw a need for the development of a decentralized learner support strategy. To most²⁸ this increase in student volume compromised quality, which was followed by high failure rate that made the institution less attractive to prospective students: "...as we saw it, we thought this is just as good as it gets, and beyond that, the diminishing returns. You can not have so many learners with little to no support at all..." (February, 2000).

The institution with reference to its learners, lecturers and outside stakeholders, in close collaboration with the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), proposed an Integrated Learner-Centered Distance Education Model. The aim of this model was to increasing learner throughput by the year 2000. The developed model for TSA comprise of three focus areas as the basis for a well functioning distance education institution, they are:

- Quality learner support
- Quality courseware, and
- Quality support services

As part of the quality learner support, tutors were appointed throughout the 9 Provinces of South Africa to:

- Facilitate the learning process of learners by offering a direct, personal and subject-related services;
- Develop the employability and non subject skills for learners;
- Interact with learners to ensure their retention as subjects and to motivate them achieve success;

²⁸ Thoughts expressed by TSA academic staff, through qualitative interviews

- Mark assignments, in this way to substantially decrease the turn around time of assignments submitted, and returned to students.

The larger goal of tutor support as proposed by the South African Institute of Distance Education (SAIDE, 1998) are the following:

1. To guide and counsel learners;
2. To provide human contact between the learners, the course material and the organization;
3. To plan and facilitate tutorials and one-to-one tutorial sessions with learners;
4. To assist learners to develop time-management and study skills;
5. To motivate and inspire learners to continue their studies;
6. To help learners to work through the course material;
7. To guide and counsel learners;
8. To help individual learners to connect the learning to their own experiences;
9. To provide timely and helpful feedback on assignments;
10. To provide a voice for learners in the institution (for example through passing on learners' feedback to the course designer).

Apart from the roles of tutors in distance education, SAIDE (1998: viii) also emphasizes the values and attitudes of tutors. SAIDE believe that tutors should respond to learners' needs with passion, consistently and in good time.

As part of the evaluation processes of the ILCDE model, a large volume of research is being conducted to evaluate the effect of this model and, here with specific reference to the tutor support, if it has achieved the above-mentioned purposes. This background raises this research question:

Research Question

How do tutors and tutor managers experience the provision of tutorial support services at TSA?

LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE LEARNING

Many universities in open and distance learning (ODL), such as the Indira Gandhi National Open University, the Open University of the United Kingdom and Oklahoma have resorted to televised instructional systems as some of the best forms of learner support (Dillion and Gunawardena, 1992). Learner support has recently been highly technological and relatively expensive with the use of the Internet facilities, also difficult to administer in some third world countries and specifically in the deep rural areas where basic resources like electricity is nonexistent.

The concept of 'flexible learning' has hence been adopted as having the potential to exploit the advantages of cooperative or work-integrated education and training, open learning, distance education, face-to-face tuition and technology-enhanced learning in an integrated manner (Moore, 1996). Institutions in these environments such as TSA and the University of South Africa (UNISA), providing their learner support in deep rural areas have traditionally resorted to print media and televised/VHS materials. Lack of learner support resources has

timely been identified as a shortcoming to distance provision in South Africa²⁹, where the only support directly accessible to some learners has often only been the library.

Recently, such institutions as TSA have leaned towards the utilization of online Internet support, videoconferencing and other multi-media systems, although these media are accessible by few learners and mainly from towns and cities (West, 1996). Confronted with low throughput rates (high failure and dropout rates) attributed to learners' un-preparedness for both higher learning and distance studies, contact support through sessions provided by tutors had to be geared up. The contact sessions, i.e., tutor to learner is developed into organised groups that simulate lecturer to learner relationships of the residential campuses.

METHODS

The study followed a qualitative research approach, which is explorative, descriptive and contextual in nature. Focus group interviews with tutors were conducted throughout the regional offices of TSA. Focus group interviews were thought to be the appropriate method of data collection because of its ability to, among other things elicit information and experiences with some elements of intimacy (Asbury, 1995).

Population

The population of this research, consisted of all tutors and tutor managers in all the nine regional offices of TSA and sampling was for tutors, random and universal for tutor managers since each regional office has one tutor (Polit & Hungler, 1991).

Recruiting Participants for focus group interviews

Once the research population was identified, i.e. tutors and tutor managers, regional directors were contacted to liaise with the two parties, asking them to participate in the focus group interviews (Wilson, 1989). In this study participants were selected according to the following criteria (Krueger, 1994):

- They were tutors and tutor managers at the regional offices of the Technikon SA;
- Selection of tutors tried to strike a balance between the gender representation in the focus groups.
- Selection was also based on race, with representation from all race categories of the country, i.e., blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians.

The number of focus group interviews held depended to a large extent on the saturation of data determined through repeating themes (Morse, 1995: 147-149).

Preparing for the focus group meeting

The primary requirements for the physical location of the meeting were that that they were supposed to be held in an environment that is comfortable and accessible to the participants. An audiocassette recorder was used in capturing data during the interview sessions (Asbury, 1995). In this research, there was no need to prepare the field that much because, tutors are well known to regional directors of the institution. The regional directors invited participants

²⁹ Netswera, F.G. (1999) The assessment of TSA's distance learner centres and Mavundla, T.R (2000) Rural students perception of distance learning

to focus group interviews. Participants were made aware of the venues and times of interviews in advance.

The Focus Group Interview Session

Focus group interviews with tutors and tutor managers were held in two separately groups. The separation of these groups facilitated a relaxed atmosphere specifically for tutors who report directly to the tutor managers and could be intimidated by their presence. Before each focus group interview starts, the leader prepared the seating arrangements in a circle, so that it was easy for participants to communicate appropriately. The participants were greeted and welcome to sessions.

- *Research Ethics*

Participants were given a consent form to sign giving the researcher permission to use an audio tape recorder during the session. The consent form also tabulated the right to which participants were entitled and were told about the purpose of research. Anonymity regarding tutor names that links them to the information provided was ensured and participants were told that participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed that tape recordings were to be destroyed when the research was completed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings of this research are discussed verbatim under various themes in two phases, which are phase one = tutors' experiences of tutorial support and phase 2= perceptions of the tutorial support by tutor managers. The summary of all emergent themes is attached in Appendix 1.

Phase 1: Tutors' experience of the tutorial support to TSA learners

The relationship building phase

This theme dealt with forming a working relationship with tutors, which involves signing of contracts, and then orientation to TSA and later tutor training workshops.

Contracting with the Technikon

The need to meet and familiarize oneself with permanent staff members of the institution has been raised. This has become one of tutors' main concern as they have been meeting TSA staff only on the day of signing contracts and never heard from them after that.

Lack of orientation of tutors to their work

It seems that tutors are not given orientation regarding their anticipated work at the Technikon. As soon as they are appointed, they have to start the mentoring/tutoring process. *"...I'm not the tutor for TSA only, but I'm used to other institutions, I'm used to these orientation sessions..."*, *"...I'm not sure whether TSA does orientate people or not. You just have to start without even being oriented..."*

Lack of tutor training workshop sessions

Tutors also expressed the view that the institution does not expose them to training sessions. They are of the opinion that training workshops may keep them abreast of developments in their subjects and technikon processes.

Inconsistency in the treatment or communication with tutors TSA lecturers

It became clear that there is no consistency in the way tutors are treated by TSA lecturers. Because TSA lecturers are representatives of the Technikon one may as well say that their lack of consistency in the way they treat the tutors is the reflection on the Technikon. "...it is only this year that we got a telephone call...", "...She is quite cute, she phones me...", "...So I think it depends on the individual because she has guided me a lot, you know she will say "I expect this..."

Importance of information communiqué

If tutors could regularly receive proper information a lot of positive rewards could be reaped in the whole tutor system. This they indicated could improve or make their tutoring role of tutoring more rewarding to learners and themselves:

- Tutor information associated with good student guidance
Tutors were of the opinion that appropriate and timeous information helps them guide students in the right direction. "...Its very important to get that information so that I know I'll guide my students...", "...we need to communicate, I actually would like to have the exam paper before hand, so I know I'm guiding my students in the right direction..."
- Lack of tutor information associated with poor student guidance
On the other hand tutors associated lack of proper information with poor guidance. They were afraid that they might be guiding student wrong. "...for the whole year I could be guiding the person on wrong track, giving people something that's not gonna come out in the examination..."

Information to students about contact sessions

It became clear that students were not given information about dates, times, and venues for contact sessions. This resulted to the following: -

Lack of information associated poor students' attendance at contact sessions

...there was no attendance of students, none what so ever...", "...because students did not know. Even the last one that I phoned. The very one who attended said that he knew nothing about the tutorials..."

Tutors perception of self and students during guidance

This theme details the perception of themselves with regarding to exposure to enough and appropriate information as well perceived student preferences regarding tutors during guidance.

Tutor's self perception during student guidance

The knowledge that one had enough and appropriate information during contact sessions with students helped tutors perceive themselves to be in a right direction. Meaning that it boosted their ego during class contacts with students. "...in a subject like Personnel Management you try and guide on the right track, and you know you are in a right track..."

Tutor perceived students' preferences during guidance

Tutors think that students prefer receiving guidance directly from lecturers than someone who does not set the examination papers. This implies that students preferred their lecturers to

tutors affecting attendance since tutors are viewed to have less information to impart relating to examination than would lecturers. *"...If I were to come into class of this person knowing that he/she does not set the exam, and he/she doesn't know if she is on the right track or not, I wouldn't come..."*

The perception of time allocated for student guidance

Tutors were of the opinion that six hours is a very little time which one may use to guide students appropriately. They indicated that the type of students they are guiding do not prepare prior to contact sessions. Some tutors find themselves having to teach students everything. They are of the opinion that they are not tutoring but teaching students. *"...because our students are a type of students who don't read..."*, *"...so that when they come to class they don't know anything. In fact we are not tutoring we have to start from scratch..."*, *"...I think this six hours per year is too short, too little..."*

Strategies of getting students to attend classes

It became clear that students were not attending at contact sessions. Due to the problem of poor attendance tutors devised strategies for bringing students to sessions. These include the following:

- Getting student lists

Tutors are complaining that they are not given student class lists.

"...even with student lists I don't have it till this present moment...", *"...but last year I got it at a later date not with the other materials that I got at the beginning of the year..."*, *"...so we just have no lists now..."*, *"...but what I actually did was to get hold of a print-out..."*

- Putting a notice

Due to poor communication between the Technikon and students concerning contact sessions, some tutors had to put notices on notice boards. *"...no one told me that I should write a notice to tell the students, that was my own initiative..."*

- Phoning students

"...I phoned them physically. If I could not get hold of them I tried again, if I got hold of them I told them about the dates for the class and at the end you would find one..."

Lack of information and its impact on class attendance

There is strong evidence to suggest that learners and to some extent tutors themselves have no adequate access to dates and venues of classes as these are prepared by lecturers and departmental heads. *"...they changed the system they gave to students at registration lists of dates when actually tutors were giving classes. They tried it once and give them during registration, which worked much better, so far we have many students attending..."*

Lack of knowledge on the part of tutors

It became clear that tutors lack knowledge on various aspects of their duties including the outline of the exam question paper, what is expected of themselves by lecturers concerned.

Lack of knowledge of the exam paper outline

"...but actually being a tutor you mean more you don't just need study material that the student receive. You actually need a bit more like say what is expected of you especially when you don't know the exam...", "...How is the exam going to be set up..."

Lack of knowledge of expectations of the lecturer

"...So its difficult for me being a tutor to actually help a student because I'm not hundred percent sure what the in-charge of the subject wants...", "...you what she expects from me..."

The physical characteristics of venue used for contact sessions

It also became clear in a number of occasions that tutors were also struggling to get proper venues for their contact sessions with students. Tutors mentioned factors like accessibility or location of venues, size, readiness for use, and cleanliness.

Accessibility of venues

This factor covers the physical location of venues for contact sessions. In most cases tutors complained that their venues for contact session with students were not accessible to students. *"...the college was pathetic, and it was difficult for students to get there..."*

Size of venues for contact sessions

Tutors were of the opinion that all venues for contact sessions should be big enough to accommodate students without problems. *"...the classes should be big..."*

Readiness to use

They mentioned the fact that venues should always be ready for use by students. They mentioned that some venues are always occupied and they've got wait outside the room. *"at the technical college your class is ready for you...", "...when ever you go there you will say you are lucky if you go there and find a venue vacant...", "...even last time I had to wait for somebody to go off and I had to take my student in..."*

The hygienic conditions of the venue

They were also of the opinion that the venues should be neat at all times. *"...always neat..."*

Payment of remuneration of tutors

It was very painful to discover that most tutors are complaining about their salaries. They revealed that it is very difficult for them to get payment for services rendered to the technikon in the form of contact sessions with students. *"...eh, when I started here, we waited the whole year and half before we got our first remuneration often made phone calls, eventually we managed to get the money...", "...I don't know how the remuneration is working this year but will see how it goes with my first class this month..."*

Inconsistency of remuneration

Tutors were also troubled by lack of consistency in the manner in which they are paid by the Technikon. They revealed that it appears as if there is no proper date for payments. *"...if I don't get it tomorrow, I'll get it end June. If I don't get it at the end of June, may be next year..."*

Waiting time for salaries

It became clear that there was a long waiting time for salaries of tutors and that such a waiting time was universal problem. *"...it wasn't just a problem for me, but it was a problem for every tutor. I know all of them experienced the same problem..."*

Problems associated with tele-tutoring

Another problem experienced by tutors is that students don't make calls when a tutor uses telephone tutoring. Students are given telephone numbers and the times in which they should make calls, but don't until they are under the pressure of the final examination. *"...its that one and that one who makes calls..."*, *"...unless its towards the exam times..."*, Tutors gave the following perceived factors as reasons that make students not to make phone calls:

Cost of a telephone call *"...I think it's a bit expensive for them because they don't usually phone somebody..."*

Telephone contact times *...more especially during the day because my hours are from 5 to 6 p.m. May be if it was after 8:00 p.m. it inconvenience to me work after 8:00 p. m..."*

Problems associated with learners' assessments

Tutors also experience problems with regard to learners assessments. They are not getting marking guides for assignments and they are also not given feedback regarding the learners' performance after examinations.

Difficulty to get marking guides

Tutors also exposed the fact that they are marking assignments, but it is very difficult for them to marking guides or memos. *"...I mark assignments as well, and I struggle to get the memos of those assignments..."*

Lack of feed back to tutors regarding exam results

Tutors also stated that they are not informed about the results of their students. This leaves them without knowing whether they were effective or not in order that they may improve in the coming years. *"...I think that we are interested in knowing the results at the end of the year..."*, *"...Because we should know where we are from and where we going..."*, *"...I think that the feed back is very much important so that you improve where you have done bad..."*

Phase 2: Tutor managers' perception of the tutorial service at TSA

After getting the experiences of tutors regarding the tutorial support service of TSA, it became necessary to explore and describe the tutor managers' perception of the whole tutorial service of the institution. It is interesting to note that the findings of both phases of research complement each other. While tutors are talking about their negative experiences in the tutorial support service, tutor managers are giving the reasons for issues experienced by tutors. The findings further reflect the levels at which the tutors and tutor managers are in terms of services they render for the technikon. One may describe the tutor as at service rendering level which we may call level one, whilst tutor managers managerial level which we term level two.

Need for support structures

The tutor managers expressed their needs in regional offices of TSA in the form of support structures. The provision of adequate structures will assist in the provision an appropriate and

well co-ordinated tutorial support service. Tutor managers revealed that the Information Technology was one of important support structures.

The role of information and communication technology (ITC) in the tutorial process Tutor managers are of the opinion that ITC should assist in relating appropriate tutorial information to students. Tutor managers are of the opinion that the ITC is not doing what they expect it to accomplish. They feel they are not getting enough support from the ICT with regard to the tutorial system. *"...at this stage I don't think that we are getting enough support as well..."*

ITC associated with unfulfilled promises

Tutor managers are of the opinion that the ITC does not fulfil its promises with regard to the tutorial process. *"...we find ourselves being promised certain things that IT is going to do, and at the end of the day we find ourselves having to sit down and write students telling them about tutoring classes..."*

Difficulty to access information

Tutor managers complained about difficulties of accessing management information from the system. They indicated that it takes a long period of time before they could have their request met by the IT department. *"...I tried last year to get information on the amount of students who were failing Accounting. To get this management information of looking at 1st, 2nd and 3rd assignment...looking at individual programs. It took me three months to get this information . Actually there is a need for IT support*

ITC perceived to be doing tutoring system down

Tutor managers perceive the ITC to be doing them down because students are getting wrong letters regarding tutoring information. They are of the opinion that this causes confusion among students. *"...you will find that as a region we have already put down certain information in the system, but when you are about to retrieve that information during registration as per agreement that was reached between the IT as well as us the region, the information that is required is not there..."*

Poor communication between program groups and regions

Tutor managers complained about poor communication between the regional offices and program groups. If there is communication they feel its not up to standard. Program groups don't liaise with tutor managers during changes in their schedules. *"...now the information that the student is receiving is in contrast with the information that I forward to the student..."*

Inability to link students with tutors

Poor communication between program groups and regional offices has severe problems. The program groups also don't understand the arrangement of certain regional offices. As a result they link students with tutor who are in other geographic areas, making it difficult for students to have contact with those tutors.

"...linking some students with tutors, that's our main problem...", "...especially if people are in Gauteng they don't seem to understand demarcation, like who falls where...", "...they just assume if you are at KwaZulu-Natal you fall at Durban or New Castle..."

Improperly labeled or addressed items

The issue of poor communication goes much further linking students to tutors who are inaccessible to lack of knowledge of other existing offices within regions. This results to items requested by those offices mislabeled or addressed, which leads to delays in dealing with problems. *"...if you want something before you get it, it gets to either of us or it either gets out..."*

Lack of study material, memos and exam guidelines

One shocking statement made by tutor managers was that there is lack of study material for tutors. This leads to tutors coming unprepared to tutorial sessions. *"...the other thing is not receiving study material..."*, *"...we don't have memos for some of our tutors. We don't have exam guidelines..."*, *"...and when the student phone the technician asking their respectable lecturers, they tell them go to regional offices..."*

Embarrassment on the part of tutors

Due to lack of study material, tutors have to come to contact sessions unprepared and they have to borrow study material from students in order to prepare for classes. It is even worse if the tutor managers don't have the material. *"...that means that before having class they must borrow from students...it's a bit embarrassing to tutors..."*, *you speak to somebody at the head office they say that was sent ages ago..."*

Tutor expected to buy prescribed books

Tutor managers also revealed that tutors are not supplied with textbooks, that they are expected to buy these on themselves. *"...they've got to pop out money from their pockets and buy textbooks..."*, *"...they knew that they are going to have tutors. What they should do is to speak to libraries and ask them to provide textbooks to tutors..."*

The appointment of tutors

Tutor managers also revealed that in most instances they are not part and parcel of the tutor appointments in their regions. This is a causative of stress among themselves since they are expected to work with these tutors on a daily basis.

Selection of tutors

Tutors managers are not given a chance of being part of the tutor selection process. They would like to go out there and make their own analysis on the caliber of tutors they want. *"...I think another thing is the selection of tutors and the way of selecting tutors is giving us an opportunity of selecting tutors not only to select tutors but to go out there and look for tutors..."*, *"...I don't think they give us enough support for that..."*,

Types of tutors

Tutor managers are of the opinion that there is difference between tutors and that at times tutor selection should also look into the area of tutor practice. They felt this could provide them with quality tutors. There tutors in education field and professional tutors e.g. auditors, engineers etc.

- Tutors in education

Some tutor managers were of the opinion that tutors who are in the education do well when compared to those that are not. *"...tutors that really take education and training...people who are really committed to education and training...I mean teachers and lecturers...those type of people who are in one way or another...teaching..."*, *"...those people are doing well..."*,

"...I don't really say its like that, I found my tutors who are outside of education they find difficulty to really facilitate..."

- Tutors in practice professions

Some tutors were of the opinion that one may need to approach people have hands practical experience. These are people who are up to-date with what developments in their professions. *"...sometimes you need to go to people who are up to-date with what they are doing..."*, *"...people who are in terms with what they are doing..."*, *"...people who are in good practice with what they are doing..."*, *"...we need them in order to tell us what they expect from us..."*, *"...especially for public sector, we need what the public sector wants...accounting too we need people who are up to-date with accounting..."*

Lack of authority among tutor managers regarding the appointment of tutors

Tutor managers were of the opinion that they lack authority during the appointment of tutors. They mentioned that most powers rest on the shoulders of an immediate manager. As a result they lack authority to judge a person who is going to be appointed. *"...most powers don't rest with you immediate manager..."*, *"...the reasons they give might be that you are not a subject specialist..."*, *"...you can't have the authority to really appoint a person..."*

Disregard of tutor managers associated with inconsistent treatment of tutors

Due to the fact that some tutors feel they are important to the Technikon, they tend to look down upon tutor managers since they are treated differently from other tutors. As time goes on tutor managers get reports from student about tutors who don't attend classes. This affects tutor managers a lot because they feel responsible for the acts and omissions of tutors. *"...he does not even care to talk to me..."*, *"...if you send him assignments he doesn't even return them to you...since the beginning of March up to today..."*, *"...certain assignments he doesn't even return them to me..."*

Inconsistencies in the number of tutors appointed in the 2nd and 3rd registration cycles

Tutor managers also experience a decline in the number of tutors appointed in regional offices for the second and third registration cycles. They are of the opinion that this leads to insufficient support to learners. They feel the decline in the number tutors employed for the second and third registration cycle confuse students who think that the technikon should maintain a similar pattern throughout all registration cycles. *"...they limited the tutors for registration three they also limited the number of contact sessions..."*, *"...they don't even have tutors for the second registration cycle..."*

Inconsistencies in the planning of programs associated with confusion on the part of students

Inconsistencies were also identified in the planning of programs. Tutor managers revealed that at times there were no assignments in the second to subsequent years. They mentioned that such inconsistencies in the planning of programs confuse students and this gives them a problem students come to them to inquire. *"...but when she comes to the second year it's a different world all together..."*, *"...its either they don't have assignments..."*, *"...they are totally confused as a result they give us problems..."*, *"...there is a lot of confusion..."*, *"...*

Roles of tutor managers in the tutorial system

Tutor managers are of the opinion that they have to coordinate and ensure continuity of the tutorial support for learners. They feel that in order to make a decision one has to carry that decision right through the year and that there should be no inconsistencies. *“...you have to coordinate this...to make decisions you have to carry that decision...right through the year...”*, *“...and we can’t be unfair to students of the second and third registration...”*

Poor perception of tutors associated with inadequate usage of the infrastructure

There is a strong belief among tutor managers that lecturers at TSA have a negative perception of the tutors. They think that tutors will take over their jobs. Thus, they don’t give duties to tutor. Tutor managers are of the opinion that this leads to an inadequate usage of the infrastructure. *“...people in the top management don’t border themselves about this whole process of decentralization...”*, *“...the regional offices are there we have to use them...because a lot of money is invested in the whole infrastructure...”*, *“...lecturers see tutors as an optional link...”*.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has drawn in experiences from just but a few of TSA’s tutors. Some of the conclusions that the report makes include the following:

Tutor training on among other things tutoring, relationship building between the learner and the tutor (customer care) is central to the success of the tutoring process. Most of these tutors are individuals working in industry and have neither teaching no guidance experience, which compromises the quality of the tutorship that they offered.

Logistical misunderstandings such as the communication confusion between the lecturer, the tutor and the learner regarding the attendance of tutor sessions should be cleared and clear guidelines on communication be formulated. Poor communication, which is also referred to by the tutor managers, is also prevalent between programme groups and the regional offices has an enormous impact on delivery. The institution has to make available funds to tutors for telephonic communication or render all administrative communication that relates to tutor activities by themselves. The appointment of tutors which is currently left to the subject and departmental managers has been criticized by tutors referred to as characterized by elements of favoritism and lack of cooperation and respect for the tutor managers by tutors. Although general policies on the management of the tutor system are nonexistent, such policies should be updated to address activities relating to reporting style, clarification of communication lines and the management of tutor sessions should be developed.

REFERENCES

- Asbury, J. 1995. Views of focus group research. *Qualitative health research*. Vol. 5 No.4, pp. 144-420.
- Dillon, C. L and Gunawardena, C. N. 1992. Learner support in distance education: An evaluation of a statewide telecommunication system. *International Journal of Instructional Media* Vol.19 Issue4, pp. 297, p6 charts.
- Kruger, R. A. 1994. *Focus group: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Moore, D. M. 1996. A flexible learning system for South Africa. *Open Learning in South Africa Review*. No2. pp. 54-60.
- Morse, j. M. (1995) The significance of saturation. *Qualitative health research*, 24, 385-390.
- Polit, D. F and Hungler, B. P. 1991. *Nursing research: Principles and methods*. Fourth Edition. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company.
- (1998). South African Institute of Distance Education's (SAIDE) report on ILCDE Model for South Africa
- West. P. 1996. On-line Education via the Internet. *Open Learning in South Africa Review*. No2. pp. 87-82.
- Wilson, H. S. 1989. *Research in Nursing*. Second Edition. Readwood City: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.



Summary of Findings (Emerging themes)

TUTORS' EXPERIENCES	TUTOR MANAGERS' PERCEPTIONS
<p>The relationship building phase</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Contracting with the Technikon Lack of orientation of tutors to their work Lack of tutor training workshop sessions</p> <p>Inconsistency in the treatment or communication with tutors TSA lecturers</p> <p><i>Importance of giving information to tutors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor information associated with good student guidance • Lack of tutor information associated with poor student guidance <p><i>Information to students about contact sessions</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Lack of information associated poor students' attendance at contact sessions</p> <p>Tutors perception of self and students during guidance <i>Tutor's self perception during student guidance</i> <i>Tutor perceived students' preferences during guidance</i></p> <p>The perception of time allocated for student guidance Strategies of getting students to attend classes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting a students' list • Putting a notice • Phoning students <p>Giving of information versus improvement of class attendance</p> <p>Lack of knowledge on the part of tutors Lack of knowledge of the exam paper outline Lack of knowledge of expectations of the lecturer</p> <p>The physical characteristics of venue used for contact sessions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of venues 	<p>Need for support structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of information and communication technology (ICT) • ICT associated with unfulfilled promises • Difficulty to access information • ICT perceived to be doing tutoring system down <p>Poor communication between program groups and regions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to link students with tutors • Improperly labeled or addressed items <p>Lack of study material, memos and exam guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embarrassment due to lack of study materials • Tutor expected to buy prescribed books <p>The appointment of tutors</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Selection of tutors</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Types of tutors</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutors in education • Tutors in practice professions <p>Lack of authority among tutor managers regarding the appointment of tutors</p> <p>Disregard of tutor managers associated with inconsistent treatment of tutors</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of venues for contact sessions • Readiness to use • The hygienic conditions of the venue <p>Payment of remuneration of tutors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistency of remuneration • Waiting time for salaries <p>Problems associated with tele-tutoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of a telephone call • Telephone contact times <p>Problems associated with learners' assessments</p> <p><i>Difficulty to get marking guides</i> <i>Lack of feed back to tutors regarding exam results</i></p>	<p>Inconsistencies in the number of tutors appointed in the 2nd and 3rd registration cycles</p> <p>Inconsistencies in the planning of programs associated with confusion on the part of students</p> <p>Roles of tutor managers in the tutorial system</p> <p>Poor perception of tutors associated with inadequate usage of the infrastructure</p>
--	--

Lost and found: open learning outside the doors of academe

Jennifer O'Rourke, British Columbia, Canada

As contemporary open and distance learning enters its fourth decade and approaches organisational middle age, enthusiasm seems to be waning for its original goal of extending educational opportunity to those who had been left out. The mantra, coined by the OUUK, to be "open as to people, places, methods and ideas" now appears less often in open learning publications than references to customers, markets and cost-recovery. Many academic institutions that have recently espoused ODL see it as a means of capturing a niche market for its academic specialties, preferably by serving profitable, fully employed learners through advanced information technologies. As one critic puts it, "the implication is that choosing a particular university, following a particular regimen, will turn the student into a specifiable and identifiable product." (Franklin, 1990). When ODL seems poised to be in the vanguard of what Tait (2000) terms "the marketisation of education", it leaves the nagging question about the re-marginalisation of learners that are no longer sufficiently rewarding for institutions to serve.

Those with a longer view of organisational history often refer to the phenomenon of small, innovative organisations that have the right idea at the right time, flourish, expand, and then become institutionalised and inflexible, only to be displaced by another small, innovative organisation that has a good idea, and so on. Is it possible that in the field of open and distance learning, a new kind of organisation might be better able than established providers to respond to the need for genuinely accessible learning? Perhaps this new kind of provider is already here, and is quietly operating in areas that are considered unrewarding for the established academic ODL institutions. This article will explore what has been achieved recently by non-academic organisations that have offered original and creative ODL programs to learners in challenging situations.

The broad questions about the apparent right turn in ODL cannot possibly be answered in a short article. But perhaps they have piqued your interest in considering some examples of responsive, individualised open learning offered by organisations that have not joined the stampede for customers. The examples are from three courses offered by non profit agencies or non government organisations (NGOs) for whom market share is not an issue. They have been chosen as illustrations because my experience with them, as course author, researcher, or tutor, led me to reflect on how the quality of the learning process differs in an academic and non-academic context, and raised questions about how learning is affected by the organisational and operational goals of the provider. There is no claim that these examples are either unique or representative; just the observation that there is something to be learned from them about reaching learners in a non-academic context.

Near the end of this article, we will come back to the larger questions, and consider whether lessons from these situations might be more widely applicable to other ODL programs. Along the way, we will reflect on how the values and ethos of the provider shape the learning experience.

Common features: otherness, altruism and situated learning

At first glance, it seems that there would be few commonalities among these situations; a course in effective writing for staff in a UN agency; a course in writing project proposals for professionals with a common interest in environmental issues, and a basic literacy program for adults. But even though the learner populations were quite different, all learners shared some characteristics of "otherness" as Tait (1999) terms it, by virtue of being outside the dominant Western countries, cultures or economies. Moreover, the providers were all agencies operating in the social and environmental field: they shared what might be called "a culture of altruism" and feature what Tait (ibid) describes as "non commoditised relations, which are not subject to the imperatives of profitability and the associated instrumental rationalities of managerialism". These factors and the importance of situated learning (outlined below) may be the reasons why similar themes emerged about learner support, despite differences in course content and delivery methods.

All three courses were designed for what is now termed situated learning. The concept of situated knowledge expands Schon's idea of reflective practice by recognising the importance of using everyday experience and personal interaction to take reflection to the next stage: insight. From insight it is one more step to practical application.

In an article on professional development for teachers, Leach (1999) explains how situated knowledge links learning with everyday practice,

Situated knowledge becomes the crucial component which drives reflection and in turn the process of learning. This perspective challenges traditional dichotomies between theory and practice, institutional (or school) learning and everyday learning, between thinking and doing, mind and body. As an account of learning it presents a view of cognition as ongoing, unfolding and experiential, which has important insights not only for curriculum development but also for learner support in teacher education.

This view of learning as a holistic continuum makes sense not just for teacher education, but for many situations in which learning is an essential thread in accomplishing everyday tasks. In this context, learners are not expected to make all the connections between theory and practice on their own: instead, support "must be centrally grounded in social practice, recognising that knowledge is constantly created and transformed at the intersection of the dialogue between people, their collective knowledge and experience, in particular settings and context." (Leach, 1999)

In all three learning situations, personal mentoring or tutoring helped learners to make the links among three elements; their own experience, course content that presented principles of good practice, and the application of these principles to their everyday work and life.

An overview of the programs

Before exploring how individual and organisational support was conceptualised and how it evolved in each situation, here is some background about each program and its provider.

Effective Writing for UNHCR is a customised course developed in response to an identified need for clearer written communication among staff within that organisation. UNHCR, the

United Nations High Commission for Refugees, is the United Nations agency that provides immediate and longer term support for refugees displaced from their homes by conflict or natural disasters. Most of the approximately 5,000 international staff work away from their own countries in the field, either on site where refugees are gathered, or in nearby regional offices. For many staff, English is an acquired additional language.

The Commonwealth of Learning provided the open and distance learning framework for development and delivery of the course. The course author, Maree Bentley, consulted widely with UNHCR staff and conducted an extensive review of UNHCR written communication throughout the course preparation stages. *Effective Writing* presents the principles and practice of good writing in the context of the UNHCR organisation, and incorporates many examples from typical situations. In other words, the course enables participants to see good communication practice in terms of their own daily reality, and invites them to apply the principles of good writing to their own work.

The course is structured as a print package with integral tutorial support available by e-mail. The print package consists of three modules, but learners complete only two. A common first module covers the basic principles of effective writing; the next modules focus on different types of writing that are typical of different roles within the organisation; either daily written communication, such as memos, faxes, emails and letters, or more extensive and formal reports that are required regularly at UNHCR.

Learners have six months to complete the course, but set their own individual schedule for completion of each of two modules. Assignments for each module are based on the learner's own work-related writing: they enable the writer to analyse and reflect on the work and obtain detailed feedback and suggestions from their tutor. Each learner is assigned to a specific tutor. Tutors work with up to 15 participants at once, maintain regular e-mail contact with each learner, answer questions from learners about the module activities and assignments, and provide assessment for each assignment.

Writing Project Proposals was developed for LEAD International, an organisation that promotes greater awareness of environmental issues among present and future decision makers. The centrepiece of LEAD's work is a two-year training program provided to about 200 mid-career professionals working in business, government, academia, NGOs and media in 13 regions world wide. Although participants complete their training programs in English, the majority are not native English users. Many graduates of the program continue their affiliation with LEAD³⁰ by serving as resource people for LEAD programs, participating in continuing professional development, and by maintaining contact with others from their cohort.

LEAD identified a need among LEAD Fellows and Associates for enhanced skills in writing proposals, so they could obtain funding to implement specific environmental projects. LEAD felt this need could be best addressed by a distance program, and The Commonwealth of Learning provided the distance education expertise for the development of the course. The course consists of a print package and e-mail tutorial support. Participants were expected to

³⁰ LEAD uses the term "the LEAD family" to encompass LEAD Associates, (current participants in the two year program), LEAD Fellows, (program graduates) and staff of the LEAD organisation in its central and regional offices.

have the basic project concept in place before they began the course, so they could proceed with the proposal writing stages during the course. The *Writing Project Proposals* materials present the principles of proposal writing and real-life examples, and are designed to enable participants to work systematically on their own project proposals. Mentors responded to individual questions, provided regular feedback on participants' work, and guided an e-mail conference among those in the mentor's group.

The pilot session was originally structured as a paced ten week course: the rationale for pacing was to enable participants to discuss each week's topic in a computer conference. However it soon became evident that maintaining the pacing was not feasible, because participants' workload and differences in preparedness for proposal writing meant that they could not complete each stage according to the same schedule. The program schedule was then extended to allow participants greater flexibility in completing each stage. Most of the interaction was between participants and their mentors, rather than among participants; participants tended to focus on completing their own proposal while juggling demanding jobs and life commitments.

Both the UNHCR and LEAD programs are provided to professionals who, for the most part, have already achieved a significant level of education. In that sense, they cannot be regarded as excluded from educational opportunity. But in other senses, they are not typical of mainstream learners served by academic institutions, and they share characteristics of those who are most likely to be marginalised by more conventional ODL (Tait, 1999).

Almost all the UNHCR staff and most LEAD participants were working and living outside the wealthier countries of Europe and North America. In UNHCR, many staff are working in very isolated and difficult conditions, and all, directly or indirectly, serve as advocates for refugees, a segment of the world population that has been decidedly excluded from the most basic life opportunities. The commitment of LEAD participants to environmental issues often sets them apart, especially where influential segments of society support political, social and economic goals that conflict with environmental sustainability. In addition to working for causes that are outside the mainstream, both UNHCR and LEAD learners face language and cultural divides, particularly in ODL, where the dominant language is English.

The third example is different in many respects from the first two, in terms of content, learner profile and technologies. Nonetheless, the AlphaRoute literacy project offers some common experiences in learner support. Funded by several government agencies, and implemented by AlphaPlus, a non profit organisation, the AlphaRoute project has developed and piloted a series of web-based literacy programmes. Participants in a 1999 pilot program worked with the web-based materials over a 10 week period, at six different literacy centres in Canada. Designed for skill levels ranging from minimal literacy to early secondary school level, and for both English and French speakers, the programme covered basic language content (vocabulary, grammar and usage) and incorporated this content into everyday life issues, such as health, employment and recreation. Visuals, graphics, animation and sound were used to guide learners who had limited reading skills. Although the program was structured so that learners had to complete some self-assessment activities in sequence, they were also able to explore the whole site and try out different areas. On-site coordinators provided help to ensure that learners could get into the site: more advanced technical support was available by phone and online.

All AlphaRoute learners worked with a mentor, who was available on line and by phone, and who provided individualised feedback on their assignments. A "café" area in the site enabled learners to meet each other at a distance, and engage in group discussions on significant topics, such as euthanasia. Several learners formed an online writers' group to share their own personal writing, including their poetry, with each other.

These AlphaRoute learners were young adults who had English or French as a first language. Some were living in very marginal circumstances, and all of them, to varying degrees, were restricted in work and life opportunities because of their limited literacy skills. Interestingly, learners said that one appeal of the course was that they would be able to tell their friends that they were working on computers: it was a statement that they felt like outsiders and wanted to be part of what is considered the mainstream.

Common themes in learner support

Learner support is usually set into two broad areas: administrative services and support for learning. Since these situations involved no fees or formal academic accreditation, there were fewer administrative tasks than in an academic context. (The UNHCR's staff development department recruited and selected learners for the Effective Writing course: COL administered the record keeping tasks during course delivery and coordinated input from tutors. LEAD recruited participants from among LEAD Fellows and Associates: program delivery was coordinated by a tutor who worked closely with LEAD's training program director. Most AlphaRoute learners were already affiliated with one of the pilot sites, and were recruited by the site coordinators, who also handled basic administrative tasks.) In all three cases, the first point of contact for the learners was an organisation with which they already had a meaningful connection.

Support for learning is categorised by Lebel (1989) into four areas: cognitive, metacognitive, affective and motivational. In these situations, cognitive support involved all those activities that helped learners to enhance their knowledge and skills; identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their work; pointing out additional resources that might be helpful, and so on. Metacognitive support helped learners develop more effective approaches to learning, and recognise the significance of what has been learned and how it can be applied in different contexts. Affective support acknowledged that the learners had to contend with some very challenging situations, both in their work and everyday lives. Tutors/mentors provided motivational support by keeping in touch through email, letting learners know that they cared about their progress, and maintaining what a colleague called "the ongoing hum of awareness".

All the courses described above were challenging experiences for the participants. In two situations, they were working in an unfamiliar language, in the third, they had limited skills in managing their own learning and were working with unfamiliar technology. When work and/or life situations took priority for weeks at a time, and learning was interrupted, regular contact from a mentor or tutor helped to sustain a sense of continuity.

Support helped learners to individualise the learning process and apply it in their own context, in other words, to engage in situated learning. The UNHCR and LEAD participants had to apply the resource materials to their own work situation and infuse them with their

own experience: they could not treat the course as an academic exercise. The AlphaRoute learners had to determine the level and resources that were right for them, and apply what they were learning to situations that were relevant to them. Tutors/mentors had to learn about their participants' goals and contexts in order to respond appropriately to their work.

The following samples of learner comments show how they experienced each kind of support:

Cognitive: "She (the mentor) was there to help me so I've learned where a comma should be or a question mark or just grammar and stuff like that." (AlphaRoute)

Metacognitive: "Your explanations and comments were very clear to me. The idea to work in smaller sections and simple language is not only to be clear, but the need to express a message in a language you are not proficient in. This situation forces you to find the short way to communicate effectively."
(Effective Writing)

Affective: "She (The mentor) helped me feel more confident about my vocabulary, the way I speak, in every aspect of learning. She's helped me keep my frustration level down. She was like the centre of this whole thing, I think." (AlphaRoute)

"Thanks a lot, again, for not forgetting me". (A LEAD participant, after her project plan was derailed by political upheaval in her country.)

Motivational: "Thank you very much for your support and guidance during the course period, without which I would not have been able to complete my assignments. There were times weeks would pass without doing my assignments due to exigencies of duty and your emails always put me back on the track. You never know how much I appreciated those emails."
(Effective Writing)

Assessment and indicators of success

Early indications are that each of these courses has achieved success, and that the majority of participants accomplished the goals they set for themselves. Learners also indicated that they feel more confident in applying what they have learned in their work and/or to future learning tasks. In the two courses which involve more formal assessment processes, most learners were successful.³¹

What makes the difference?

As mentioned at the outset, this article is based on reflection from personal experience with three courses offered outside the academic market. These examples are by no means unique. There are a great many other providers who work outside the traditional academic ODL context. For example, the International Extension College has for many years supported

³¹ Evaluations of each of these courses are at different stages: one has been completed, one is in preliminary form, and one is pending.

organisations that offer original, customised distance learning that is appropriate to a particular context and specific groups of learners.³²

As well, there is no claim that these three examples address every challenge in ODL. For example, two of them followed a variation of an "outreach" model, in which tutors and administrators were based in Western countries, and the majority of learners in non-Western countries. In these cases, interaction among learners was limited, partly due to time and technical constraints. Despite these caveats, reflecting on these courses led to questions about how learner support is regarded and valued, especially in "marketised" open and distance learning.

In all three cases cited here, learner support was a very significant component of the distance learning experience, in terms of time investment and impact on learners. Although distance education experience has generally confirmed the importance of learner support, there is a trend among academic providers to scale it back (Paul, 1988, Lentell, 1995).

There are many differences between marketised ODL and the three situations discussed in this article: we can only speculate whether any of these differences have an impact on the attitude towards, and investment in, learner support. You are invited to consider whether any or all of these factors has an impact on the nature and extent of learner support in ODL:

1. The courses were not offered to "paying customers" seeking an academic credential.

- How well does the academic structure, and drive for accreditation, match the needs of situated learning? Does a situation without market orientation and without formal accreditation make it easier to provide flexible learning that the learner could apply to their context?

- How well does the human interaction of caring learner support flourish in an environment of measurement and cost recovery? How well do the needs of open learning fit with the drive for standardisation and profitability?

2. The courses served relatively small numbers: the largest had 200 participants at any one time, but each tutor worked with no more than 25 learners, making it possible to respond individually to each person.

- Although many forms of ODL claim economies of scale, how well does mass education serve individual learning goals?
- Do distance learners have a right to individualised support?

3. Relatively simple communication technologies were used for individual learner support. In two of the three courses, email was the only means of tutor-learner contact, because it was the only medium that was feasible for learners dispersed world-wide. In the third situation, phone and email were used for communication between learners and mentors.

³² The work of some of these organisations is described in *Basic Education at a Distance*, edited by Chris Yates and Jo Bradley of IEC.

- Are communication technologies more effective if they are used for individualised support rather than as a generalised "all points bulletin"?
- To what extent are advanced communication technologies used to substitute high intensity activity for meaningful interaction?

4. Situated learning introduced an element of reciprocity in the tutor-learner relationship. Tutors or mentors had to learn about their participants' context in order to respond appropriately to their assignments: this exchange of knowledge between tutors and learners encouraged mutual respect for each others' areas of expertise.

- What strategies are best suited to ensuring that adult learners are treated appropriately and respectfully?
- How well does the view of "learner as customer" address the potential power imbalance between learners and an accrediting institution?

Conclusion

In North American parlance, the "lost and found" is the place in a public building, usually a dark corner room, where forgotten personal items are kept until the owner claims them. After some time, unclaimed articles are discarded or sold, and a new owner benefits. Proponents of learner support have often claimed that it is the least visible and most easily ignored aspect of open and distance learning. In marketised open learning, learner support has been sidelined by the tenet that technology is the most important instrument for achieving cost effective mass education and profitable niche programs.

What may be lost, for market-oriented providers of open and distance learning, is the value of addressing social inequalities by providing equitable access and appropriate learner support. What may have been found is a non-competitive model of providing open and distance learning through organisations whose social goals are more compatible with providing genuine learning experiences.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Donna Chiarelli and Gillian Martin-Mehers at LEAD International; to those associated with the UNHCR course; Maree Bentley, course author and Claire Carigi and Angela Kwan of the Commonwealth of Learning; and to Daniel Larocque, project leader for AlphaRoute Phase 2.

References

- Franklin, U., *The Real World of Technology*, Anansi Press, 1990
- Larocque, D., *AlphaRoute Phase 2: A Research Report*, Centre AlphPlus, Toronto, 1999
- Leach, J. "Learning in practice: Support for professional development", in Tait, A., and Mills, R., *Supporting the Learner in Open and Distance Learning*, New York, Routledge, 1999
- Lebel, C., "Le Support à l'étudiant en enseignement à distance", *Journal of Distance Education*, Vol. IV, No. 2
- Lentell, H., "Giving a voice to the tutors", in *One World, Many Voices: quality in open and distance learning*, Selected papers from the 1995 ICDE conference, Birmingham, England.
- Mills, R., "Diversity, convergence and student support", in Tait, A., and Mills, R., *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education*, New York, Routledge, 1999
- Paul, R., "If student support is so important, why are we cutting it back?", in D. Sewart, J. D., Daniel, eds, *Developing Distance Education*, ICDE, 1988, Oslo.

Schon, D., *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1987.

Tait, A., "The convergence of distance and conventional education: some implications for policy", in Tait, A., and Mills, R., *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education*, New York, Routledge, 1999

Tait, A., "Planning Student Support for Open and Distance Learning", *Open Learning*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2000

Tait, A., "Students and attachment: the nature of electronic relationships", *Adults Learning*, Vol. 11, No. 10, June 2000

Yates, C., and Bradley, J., eds, *Basic Education at a Distance*, London, Routledge, 2000

Websites: Commonwealth of Learning: www.col.org

LEAD International: www.lead.org

Challenges in adjusting to new technology in supporting learners in developing countries

Jason Pennells, International Extension College, Cambridge, England

Acknowledgements

In preparing this paper, I have benefited from ideas of colleagues within IEC and elsewhere, drawing on recent discussions, workshop sessions, bibliographies and 'grey literature'. I am directly indebted to Naomi Barnet, Jo Bradley, Judith Collier, Aileen Earle, Richard Freeman, Amanda Gibbard, Adrian Kirkwood, Brian Sayer, Ormond Simpson, Barbara Spronk and Chris Yates. Errors, omissions and views expressed remain my own responsibility.

Abstract

IEC runs face-to-face courses and workshops in UK and overseas, and teaches at a distance using traditional paper-based courses with audio tapes and correspondence tuition (using email where available). We are currently developing new versions of these courses based around use of the Internet in conjunction with paper-based materials, to add to or supersede the existing models.

Our core customers are education workers in developing countries, based in colleges, government ministries, universities, projects and elsewhere.

Designing communications-technology-dependent models of learner support for our audiences necessitates a cautious approach. For many of our students, there are major difficulties to be overcome in engaging with Internet-based courses. Access to the Internet and to the Web is limited. Connections are slow. In-country costs are high and incomes are low. Power supplies are intermittent. User skills are variable. Support is patchy. Equipment and software are often several years old.

Against these problems, the use of new technology presents potential benefits to students and IEC in terms of cost, educational richness, the quality of support and the breadth and reach of access. It also allows students to experience current educational uses of media. Changes in the environment, in terms of the infrastructure and services available, and the expectations of educators, students and others, also exert a pressure for modernisation.

Our concern as we currently engage in the design and development stages of this change is to create better opportunities rather than greater barriers for our learners.

Case studies

I should like to preface this discussion with two fictionalised case studies of distance learners in developing countries on an international distance education course. I hope this makes more tangible some of the generalities which follow.

Case study 1: Zeinab Ali

Zeinab Ali has recently moved to a new job at the Ministry of Education as student services manager on a national distance education teacher training project.

Zeinab has a wide circle of friends, colleagues and contacts with whom she enjoys keeping in touch by email. She checks her work email and personal Hotmail daily, at the office and at home. Zeinab enjoys gaining more experience in using the Web, and is excited at the online course she has enrolled on through the project.

Zeinab has found the introductory activity compulsive and stimulating, as she reads the documents she has downloaded, thinks about the questions raised and discusses them with other course participants in the conference. She has agreed to be rapporteur for her group in this introductory task and will be spending the weekend compiling the groups' responses to post to the plenary in time for the Monday morning deadline which she has negotiated with the course moderator.

Zeinab cannot imagine going back to the days before she had the Internet. She sighs when she thinks how letters would take forever to arrive (if they did) or had to be sent by expensive courier, and all the problems of fighting the fax machine. She felt so cut off in those days, and now she feels the whole world is open to her.

Case study 2: Magumbe Johnson

Magumbe Johnson is a tutor in a teachers' college and is a zonal student support officer in a national distance education teacher training project. Magumbe is responsible for supporting sixty local tutors and three hundred students. The electricity supply in the town where Magumbe works is erratic, and at the college it is even less reliable. For the past week, there has been a general problem and no power.

With financial support from the project, Magumbe has enrolled on an online course to develop his knowledge of distance education. So far, Magumbe has not been able to make much progress. In the week before the present power cut, he did spend as much time as he could spare outside his teaching and other commitments and before his journey home in the evening, at the Internet café in town, trying to log on in order to download the first reading and carry out the introductory activity. However, he couldn't get far. The Internet connection was down for much of the time; when he did manage to connect he found it very slow; and often the computer would seem to freeze up completely, and the café owner would have to reboot it.

When Magumbe did manage to maintain a connection and access the course website, he found he could not download and open the documents he was supposed to. Several days ago, he sent an email to the course moderator, but has not yet received a reply. Magumbe feels he is slipping behind as the introductory task is due to be finished by the end of the week and he has not yet been in contact with any other participants. He is losing confidence and becoming depressed. He is beginning to think the course he took last year was much easier for him to fit in with his life, with its printed materials and audio-tapes and assignments he faxed to his tutor for marking and feedback. He still uses the folders of course material he was sent for that course, especially when he is preparing tutor training workshops.

1. Introduction

IEC, the International Extension College, is an educational NGO based in Cambridge, UK. IEC is concerned with helping governments, institutions and projects in developing countries to improve equitable access to good quality, relevant education to support development, using open and distance education approaches.

Our focus is, as it has been since our foundation in by Michael Young in 1971, not essentially to be at the cutting edge of what technological education approaches might feasibly offer to privileged minorities, but to help developing countries to address their educational challenges by judiciously applying innovative methods. Broadly, the challenge has typically been to provide effective access to key areas of education to the most needy sectors of the population, on a large scale, at the lowest cost. As in any enterprise, balancing these priorities in any specific case involves compromises and creative thinking.

As well as working in-country on consultancy and training for specific projects, IEC also conducts general access training and education in open and distance education for international audiences. Such open courses attract participants from around the world, predominantly Africa, followed by Asia, South America and the Caribbean, with some representation also from the South Pacific, Europe and North America. We have also had a reciprocal course exchange arrangement with the MA in distance education of an Australian university.

This paper gives a general overview of an area of current concern in IEC: the challenges our students and we as an organisation face in planning to adopt 'new' (computer-mediated communications) technologies for supporting learners in developing countries.

IEC's established course offerings

IEC's established course offerings include both distance and face-to-face training and study. A regular face-to-face course which IEC conducts is an annual four-week course with the Institute of Education of the University of London, *Distance education for development*. IEC also runs tailored face-to-face workshops ranging from one day to several weeks, for individual clients, both in UK (generally in Cambridge) and, more often, overseas on the site of the client project or institution.

Through distance education, IEC offers an *MA and diploma in distance education*, again with the Institute of Education as our partner, through the University of London External Programme. The participants for this programme (which comprises a range of courses) are located around the world. This distance taught MA is based on a set of specially prepared print materials, supported by audio and video tapes. Tutorial support is provided by correspondence, one-to-one, between the student and course tutor. Administrative and counselling support use the same means.

A little over half of our current postgraduate distance students now have access to email. This has enabled IEC and our students to engage in much more frequent interaction. However, there remain about half who do not have access to email.

IEC's newly emerging course offerings

IEC has offered versions of the above courses and workshops over a number of years, essentially using face-to-face or traditional distance education media. As mentioned above, in recent years email has become an optional facility for tutorial, counselling and administrative communication, if a student has access to the technology. We are now developing courses

incorporating Internet-based communications in a more integral way. Various virtual learning environments (VLEs) are involved.

We have developed and run a Web-based course concerning *Globalisation*, using asynchronous text conferencing, structured modular group activities and Web-based resources, together with course books supplied for the core readings around which initial discussion of issues is based. For this course, we have used the University of Hull's Merlin VLE.

We are also currently developing a distance version of the *Distance education for development* course, initially for use with a specific overseas partner. This will place little reliance on electronic communications, as it is designed to be accessible to college staff who do not have computer or Internet facilities. As with the existing MA, it will use email as an alternative to post, courier or fax for supporting students, where email is available and preferred.

IEC's most substantial current course development activity, however, places Internet-mediated communication and study at its core. The *MA in distance education* is being revised into a model using computer conferencing and Web-based resources along with some print material as resource.

As with its predecessor, this MA is part of the University of London External Programme, which is undergoing extensive modernisation, through a 'Virtual Campus Project', to offer many of its component programmes online. As regards the *MA in distance education*, this involves updating and rewriting or replacing courses. The new versions are redeveloped both in content and in design and concept, to suit the computer-based media involved in course delivery and student support.

2. Issues and challenges

Adopting online course approaches entails various issues and challenges, impacting both on the students and on IEC as an organisation. Salient examples of these are as follows.

- Students who are more remote from facilities and less well resourced will be excluded from an online course in a way in which they would not be, and have not been, from the print and correspondence-based courses.
- Dependence on technology for course mediation is likely to fail some students, for technical rather than academic reasons.
- The cost of course materials is pushed from the providing institution (IEC) onto the student. This includes the costs of printing and binding material if desired, having a suitable computer and maintaining or paying to access Internet access and computer services.

- Skills in online course design, management and learner support need to be developed in the tutorial and administrative staff involved, and students need to acquire online study skills.
- Turnaround of communications and assignments will be expected to be far quicker than by traditional methods. Students and the institution (including contracted tutors not on IEC staff) need to establish mutually acceptable, viable and realistic expectations of support levels and turnaround speed.
- Computer conferencing provides a great opportunity for linking students from different professional and personal backgrounds, countries, languages and abilities. It also enables constructivist approaches to course design and support to be adopted effectively. However, connecting students with one another is not in itself sufficient to ensure they will work together, and some students may have entrenched learning expectations of receiving course content ('knowledge') rather than of developing it with colleagues in a constructivist way.
- In selecting the VLE to use, great importance has been placed by the External Programme on one which enables students to disconnect and study offline, rather than needing to remain online while in the VLE. Also, a VLE which provides a full range of facilities for carrying curriculum content was desired, rather than a predominantly conferencing package. In view of these criteria, the most likely VLE to be used will be Lotus Domino/Notes.
- In revising and designing course specifications, we have been concerned – on grounds of educational quality and of cost to the student – to avoid simply loading up course materials onto the Web and 'shoveling' them at students. Similarly, we need to consider the tasks we set and the Web links we provide in the online course. We need to ensure these are viable and will not require the student to pay additional software or site registration fees.
- We are also aware of the potential burden and cost of extensive tutor time online and the need for tutors to have access to and skills in the online medium. The same applies to electronic conference moderators and to staff providing administrative, technical and counselling support.

Reasons for a cautious approach to adopting new technology for our courses

Further to these issues and challenges and in view of our expected student profile, we are acutely aware of reservations about pursuing an online strategy. Some key concerns follow.

- Students' performance on online courses may become dependent more on their Web skills and levels of access than on their educational strengths.
- Using an online model may be perceived as implying that less technologically dependent means of distance education are invalid. Allied to this, the student will not experience, as they would through studying through a well designed and implemented print-based course with audio cassette and correspondence support, how effective such media as can

be. The combination of these two effects may discourage the student in a developing country from implementing appropriate distance education in their own environment. Online education is unlikely to be a realistic choice for most of them for the foreseeable future.

- Access is likely to be a major determining factor in participation. Access is *qualitative* and can mean a range of things: it is not simply a black and white question of having or not having a computer with an Internet connection. Having the use of a computer connected to the Internet will itself be limited to relatively few people. Fewer will have good connections, and for some the cost of connection will be prohibitive, with expensively metered charges. Among those who can overcome these hurdles, only some will be in possession of high level computing and Internet navigation skills. For many, if not most, computer access will be limited to opportunities in the workplace, whereas paper-based course materials could be studied at home or in any other convenient place.
- Cost will also be a factor in developing courses, and the fees will be at least as high as for the traditional courses. Yet students will probably have to spend more, on top of the course fees, to access the courses, through computer access and printing documents, than they would for a paper-based course where the package of materials was supplied.
- The quality of the educational experience available to students, assuming they can access the courses online, is the prime concern. Course design needs to encourage the best use of the online environment, so that it delivers a richer, rather than an impoverished, learning experience. For example, the experience of working online may be highly fragmented, with any purposeful study being punctuated by hours of unstructured Web browsing, email exchanges, casual social chat and technical 'administration'. Rather than this, we would wish to facilitate the focused pursuit and discussion of knowledge contributing to the achievement of the student's clearly identified learning outcomes.
- The individualisation and group interaction possibilities of online learning invite the benefits of constructivist course design. However, these characteristics also have a downside: unlike traditional distance education based on standard packages of materials and centrally quality-assured tuition, the course 'received' and participated in by each student may be far more variable and dependent on local conditions. With our student body from around the world, the variations are likely to be dramatic.
- For some students, a study process based on group interaction and collaborative work may be a deterrent rather than an attraction. The independence and privacy of traditional means of distance study might be preferred, regardless of the technological possibilities and posited benefits of studying online. With a student body widely diverse in aspects such as location, English language, educational experience, computer skills, facilities, culture and motivation, some students may not flourish with this means of studying.
- The technology which online courses depend on is particularly vulnerable for our students. Connections may be slow and intermittent. Power supplies may be very unreliable. Access to the Web may be filtered through national proxy servers, seriously limiting and slowing the online experience. Technical support may be unavailable or expensive. The computers our students use, and the software which runs on them, may

well be several generations out of date compared to the requirements of the VLE and the assumptions of course designers.

- A combination of these factors and others is likely to exclude some people who would have been able to participate in our existing distance education MA..

Potential benefits of adopting new technology for our courses

Despite all these reservations and more, there are persuasive reasons for IEC's pursuit of VLE-based courses.

- Information sharing possibilities are much better online – faster, cheaper and multi-directional – than by means of post.
- Constructivist approaches to education can be brought to course design, so that courses can be anything but simply 'pumping out knowledge'. Though we believe our established courses have avoided the latter, both in their materials and assignment design and in the tutorial support provided, nevertheless the possibilities offered by effectively using VLEs are especially rich (as Diana Laurillard originally pointed out some years ago in *Rethinking university teaching*).
- Online learning allows for variation to suit individual learners and groups, and for updating progressively, including supplementation of the core materials, references and activities by tutors and by course members as a course progresses. It is especially suitable in this regard for encouraging learners to contribute and use their own experiences as a resource in the course.
- For remote and scattered students such as ours, possibilities for peer support and for a feeling of belonging to a learning community are far greater in a successful online course compared with the traditional print and correspondence model.
- The students, through studying online, have the opportunity to experience and evaluate online learning, which constitutes part of the learning and equips them to consider the use of VLEs for their own institution's purposes.

Environmental pressures to adopt new technology

Aside from the internal strengths and weaknesses associated with VLEs for IEC's courses and student body, there are conditions in the wider environment which exert a pressure to move in the direction of online courses.

- Over the past years, the funding available for students to attend face-to-face courses in UK has been greatly reduced. This has had a very marked impact on enrolment on our UK-based courses, as it has with other institutions and courses.
- Expectations – among funders, competitors, educators, learners, policy makers and the general public – are that online courses offer the most up-to-date, economical and convenient option for distance education. The perception, valid or not, that a distance

course offered without the use of VLEs is out of date is increasingly prevalent. Thus, if only for face validity, it is increasingly important that we offer online options.

- With the growth and incorporation of online learning into the mainstream, we have to include our students in this world or run the risk of under-serving or indeed ghettoising them by remaining in the realm of the more traditional media.
- Some resources are most easily, cheaply and readily available through the Web (such as publications, references, databases and current information services). Allied to this the rapid interactive possibilities among course members and facilitators, and online learning becomes the baseline norm.
- If we are not reaching our students online, those with Internet access are increasingly likely to pass over IEC in favour of alternatives available from around the world online, regardless of the respective merits of the quality or relevance of the curriculums on offer.

3. Conclusion

The application of available technologies to solve educational challenges for disadvantaged groups remains central to IEC's purpose. We therefore have an interest in examining and applying online models for our purposes, albeit critically and with reservation where such media are less suitable.

However, IEC must remain committed above all to the primacy of fitness for purpose. This applies to the application of VLEs for our courses as much as it does to any other media, material, service or resource we use. We do not wish to adopt a technology simply on the grounds of it being possible or fashionable to do so; we wish to adopt it if it will be beneficial in terms of educational effectiveness, access and economy.

Thus as we develop and use online courses, we must remain continually reflective, asking whether this medium or collection of media can be used for our purposes; if so, how it can best be used, and whether this is the best way to serve our students.

We must therefore remain focused on our end goals. To reach those goals, we need to consider issues of equity - access, cost, and how what we offer will ultimately serve the interests of people at the margins in developing countries. We also need to keep thinking about being innovative in the application of distance education for development ends, choosing the most appropriate, effective and efficient means for the job.

The prospects for the future

The adoption of online learning touches the core of IEC's purpose and raises vital issues for us.

- Certainly, technology is able to help us achieve our purposes and the Internet has become eagerly adopted by those of our students who have access to it.

- Using online approaches can both provide for our students greater richness of learning experience and also equip them to be in the forefront of developing the education system in their institution or country.
- However, relying on the Internet and VLEs also excludes from participation, wholly or partially, many who would be able to access our established format of print-based courses with individual one-to-one tuition rather than conference discussion with fellow students.
- Though access to and reliance on the Internet is growing and seems set to continue to do so, in Africa as elsewhere, nevertheless the demographic profile of our student enrolment is likely to change towards better resourced markets, such as people interested in distance education and development work who live in Europe or North America or who are resident in a developing country on an expatriate basis, and the higher level officials of institutions or ministries in developing countries.
- Overall, IEC foresees that we will offer an increasing proportion of our courses using the Internet for student support, whether by simple email tuition or through more comprehensive online courses using VLEs. We also see the need to balance our response to the forces which draw and push us towards reliance on 'new technology' on the one hand, against, on the other hand, our commitment to the principle of making our courses accessible as cost-effectively as we can to those who will best convert the fruits of their study to the ends of furthering international development.

References

- CYRANEK, G. (2000) Virtual Learning in the African Context (A paper prepared for PALOP workshop, 14-15 November 2000, Maputo, Mozambique. Addis Ababa, UNESCO).
- FILLIP, B. (2000) Distance Education in Africa: New Technologies and New Opportunities (Washington D.C., Japan International Cooperation Agency).
- IEC (2001) *Imfundo: A review of experience with information and communications technologies in education projects* (Report on a study carried out for Department for International Development *Imfundo* Project. Cambridge, IEC).
- JENSEN, M (1998) African Internet Connectivity: Summary of International ICT Development Projects in Africa <http://demiurge.wn.apc.org/africa/projects.htm> (last accessed 25 July 2001)
- KIRKWOOD, A. (2000) Shanty Towns around the Global Village? Reducing distance, but widening gaps with ICT (a paper presented to the Conference 'Distance Education: an Open Question?', Adelaide, South Australia, September 2000).
- LAURILLARD, D. (1993) *Rethinking University Teaching* (London, Routledge).
- PERRATON, H. (2000a) Information and Communication Technologies for Education in the South (Report on a study for the Department for International Development. Cambridge, IRFOL).
- PERRATON, H. (2000b) *Open and distance learning in the developing world* (Routledge, London).
- RUMBLE, G. (2001) E-education – Whose Benefits, Whose Costs? *e_education_costs.pdf*, available at http://www.iec.ac.uk/resources_online.html. (Last accessed 26 July 2001).

Optimizing the balance between volume, costs and quality: reflections on the IGNOU experience

Prof. V.S. Prasad, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)

In a developing country of the size and complexity of India, we continue to address the challenges inherent in meeting the needs of a large, diverse and geographically dispersed learner audience at reasonable costs with acceptable levels of quality in education provision. Our experience in India reflects the constant tension between volume, costs and quality. The distance education system has evolved in response to these challenges. The IGNOU experience as an open university and apex body for distance education in India is particularly useful. In this paper, I will reflect on some key features of our experience and the lessons we have derived from it.

THE IGNOU STUDENT SERVICES NETWORK

The widening access to information technologies characterizes the emerging knowledge era in India. In the context of open access to learning materials, the quality of individual institutions' education provision will be distinguished by the quality of student support services they provide, especially technology-mediated delivery modes. We can make a difference only by strengthening student support services. IGNOU, a mega-university to borrow the phrase of Sir John Daniel, has been promoted in policy and practice as a "university with a difference" (Appendix 1 gives a brief outline of the University). Undoubtedly, distinctiveness in student support services will enable us to attain the goal of university with a difference.

The efficient performance of student support services depends on maintaining a fine balance between:

- ❖ varied needs of learners and limitations of the system
- ❖ flexibility and maintenance of standards
- ❖ sophisticated services and learner access
- ❖ educational demands and political industrial demands
- ❖ social justice and market requirements
- ❖ individualized services and group services
- ❖ services at home/workplace and at study centres
- ❖ central coordination /control and local autonomy

The student services network of the University consists of:

- ❖ Regional Services Division at headquarters (mainly responsible for establishment and management of support services);
- ❖ 29 regional centres (mainly responsible for coordinating and monitoring at regional level);
- ❖ 637 local learner support centres (known as study centres/programme centres/special study centres/work centres to deliver services to learners)

Objectives of student support services

The major objectives of student support services are enabling learners to:

- ❖ gainfully utilize the learning package by augmenting it with academic support services;
- ❖ make their choices and decisions and resolve their problems by providing administrative and information support;
- ❖ reduce their sense of isolation caused by distance and consequent lack of regular personal contact
- ❖ access resources and opportunities for personalized interaction whether mediated or face-to-face or both

Stages of support

- ❖ Pre-admission guidance (for systemic clarity and conscious decision making)
- ❖ Admission communication
- ❖ Programme guides and self instructional materials
- ❖ Induction meetings
- ❖ Guidance on study skills
- ❖ Subject-based tutorial support which we call "academic counselling"
- ❖ Practicals and assignments
- ❖ Administrative support
- ❖ Grievance redressal
- ❖ Continuous information flow

DIVERSIFIED DELIVERY SYSTEM

In order to meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous audience of learners, a diversified delivery system is adopted. The University adopts diverse delivery modes (Figure 1).

Two broad categories can be distinguished in multi-channel delivery:

1. Direct to learners: Print material; Audio-visual cassettes; Broadcast of programmes (radio, TV, ITV etc); On-line computer network; CD-ROMs; Distance learning facilitators (DLFs) or mentors or coordinators
2. Through Learner Support Centres: Study centres, work centres etc.; Partner institutions; Multi-media learning centres; Local institutional/organizational collaborators in providing delivery of services through the extension mode to foster resource pooling, both in terms of manpower and material.

Some of the major types of provisions/institutional arrangements made for providing student support services include:

- ❖ Regular study centres
- ❖ Recognized study centres
- ❖ Programme study centres
- ❖ Special study centre

- ❖ Partner institution
- ❖ Distance learning facilitator
- ❖ Recognized regional centres

Their key features have been listed in the following section.

Regular study centres

These centres offer most of the programmes of IGNOU and are located in those host institutions which have provided rent-free accommodation. IGNOU bears all recurring and non-recurring expenditure. All study centres are provided a library, necessary furniture and equipments such as TV, VCR and computer.

Recognized study centres

These centres are run with the support and involvement of government undertakings, voluntary organizations and other institutions interested in promoting the open learning system. The host institutions provide rent-free accommodation, furniture and equipments and meet the expenditure on counselling.

Programme study centres

These centres are established to provide necessary student support services for a particular programme including professional and vocational programmes with an intensive practical component.

Special study centre

A special study centre is located in an institution/organization like non-governmental organizations, voluntary organizations, panchayats, cooperatives or government departments and public institutions dedicated to the cause of a given disadvantaged group.

Partner institution

The existing resources of partner institutions are provided to IGNOU for effective delivery of programmes and supplement IGNOU's programme delivery mechanisms.

Distance learning facilitator

In order to provide support services to learners in areas not having institution-based support facilities, area-specific persons who may be retired teachers/officers, professionals, housewives, motivated individuals even if unemployed, and having a postgraduate degree and permanently residing in the given area are empanelled as distance learning facilitators.

Recognized regional centres

With the objective of extending the outreach of education, IGNOU in collaboration with the Indian Army, Navy and Airforce has launched an educational project to cater to service personnel in different parts of the country on a single window basis through recognized regional centres. Under the project, all programmes of IGNOU would be made available to army personnel through the channels adopted for the armed forces. For this purpose recognized regional centres have been established.

ADDRESSING VOLUME, COST AND QUALITY ISSUES: ATTAINING THE "IDEAL" BALANCE

In a highly stratified society like India, egalitarianism refers not merely to numbers, but to the socioeconomic profile of these numbers. Though data on the profile of the distance learner is sketchy, it does indicate the middle class, urban/semi-urban bias in student composition. The disadvantaged sections in the Indian context- rural population, women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes - are not adequately represented. The issue of language is critical particularly when we speak about the internet technologies. The Internet is dominated by the use of English. The majority of us grow with a single or two language capability. We must find ways to communicate the content available in our languages seamlessly and effectively. It is only then that we can fully address access issues in web-based education.

The whole range of learning experiences at delivery centres in terms of quality tutorial support services and peer group interactions are very important for quality distance education provision. Bench marks for quality may have to be identified and applied at input, process and output levels. There is a need to develop institutional mechanisms for maintenance of quality in the system and accreditation of institutions.

The Indian experience shows that there is no one appropriate technology for all purposes. Technology choice should take into account accessibility, availability and acceptability. Priorities in the use of technologies for distance education may be different in different contexts. The possibilities of outreach and economics of scale are important in developing countries, rather than individualized access and interactivity.

Strengthening Student Support Services

In a mega-university of IGNOU's size and complexity, quality assurance in student support services is a crucial concern. The major strategies being implemented to strengthen student support services in IGNOU include:

- ❖ provision of pre-admission counselling facilities at headquarters and regional centres;
- ❖ provision of "single window" redressal of student problems through network of student service centres at headquarters and regional centres;
- ❖ reorganization of printing, despatch and marketing operations where appropriate;
- ❖ operationalization of appropriate delivery and monitoring mechanisms (Monitoring through feedback from learners and concerned units; periodic reports from operational units; visits by headquarters/regional centre functionaries to concerned units and meetings with functionaries (including heads of divisions, faculty members, regional directors, coordinators, programme-in-charges, counsellors and students)
- ❖ provision of on-line student data and material stock inventories to schools/divisions;
- ❖ provision for transformation of print material to CD-ROM where appropriate;
- ❖ provision for enhanced student feedback and internal connectivity through use of dedicated telephone lines; interactive voice response systems; local area networks

- and wide area networks; activation of e-mail at regional centres and operational divisions;
- ❖ provision of facilities for interactive, technology-mediated counselling;
- ❖ extension of telephone facilities to study centres especially those located in remote/rural areas;
- ❖ provision of networking links to large enrolment study centres; and
- ❖ provision of special training to staff engaged in student support.

Specific Mechanisms for Improving Information Dissemination and Counselling Inputs

Information dissemination and counselling inputs have a critical role in breaking the isolation of the distance learner and provide an impetus to progress on courses and promote better course completion rates. Some specific mechanisms to improve information dissemination and counselling inputs include:

- ❖ Development of appropriate pre-admission guidance material for large scale distribution among prospective learners in multiple media including print, audio, video, broadcasts, as well as in computer database and retrievable from any computer terminal
- ❖ Programme-specific induction meetings may be organized at all study centres with participation of faculty and resource persons
- ❖ Development of study skills should be emphasized particularly for new learners with suitable printed materials, teleconferencing sessions and recorded video tapes
- ❖ Orientation of empanelled counsellors - face-to-face, videotaped presentations by course team as well as distance education experts
- ❖ Intensive counselling for low enrolment programmes at regional centres or counselling on request for low enrolment programmes or higher level programmes
- ❖ Opportunities for interacting with faculty through phone-in counselling, teleconferencing
- ❖ Provision of self instructional materials and assignments through a computer database at regional centres
- ❖ Provision of updated information about programmes, opportunities, schedules, services, activation/closure of study centres and regional centres on the web and at each node of the LAN/WAN
- ❖ Provision of admission data and evaluation data on the web

It would be of critical importance to use a *student satisfaction index* for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of student support services. Such an index would be a product of many factors including institutional arrangements; systems of tutorial and counselling services and student costs in utilizing services.

Reaching Disadvantaged Groups

In expanding access we need to consider the question - access for whom? The IGNOU mandate emphasizes serving the needs of disadvantaged groups and communities. The expansion in volume should therefore largely derive from such groups. Concomitantly we find that addressing groups with special needs may push up costs because of specific student support mechanisms that need to be put in place. Overcoming initial difficulties with studying at a distance and availing facilities provided by the institution entails significant social

opportunity costs for disadvantaged groups as compared to other sections of the student clientele.

Some key strategies for enabling the system to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups include:

- ❖ provision of alternatives to existing study centres for reaching specific disadvantaged groups ;
- ❖ setting up new study centres in backward regions not served by existing study centres;
- ❖ provision of fee waiver/ fee concessions to learners belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribe categories and women/girls in accordance with government stipulations;
- ❖ identification of unemployed youth in backward areas and slums who can promote outreach to disadvantaged communities especially in areas not covered by existing study centres;
- ❖ promotion of partnerships with institutions/agencies engaged in extension/outreach activities in rural areas such as agriculture universities; government training institutions and non-governmental organizations;
- ❖ offer of university programmes/courses through suitable partners especially in the non-governmental sector and launch of new technical and vocational programmes suitable for the needs of a particular region/area based on need assessment;
- ❖ adoption/adaptation of existing course materials developed by external agencies where found appropriate ;
- ❖ expansion in the receiving nodes for satellite-mediated communication networks by promoting partnerships with institutions/agencies engaged in training/extension/outreach activities such as agriculture universities; government training institutions and non-governmental organizations.

IGNOU has explored a wide range of both low-end and high-end technologies for various educational applications with considerable success. The University has focussed on the following considerations in technology use:

- ❖ instructional delivery tailored to the needs of specific target groups;
- ❖ use of suitable, cost-effective media mix and
- ❖ creation of a package of inputs for supporting technology use including training of counsellors and tutors, provision of adequate support services, provision of suitable maintenance inputs, promoting user friendliness and building an institutional culture that fosters use of IT.

NEW INITIATIVES IN TECHNOLOGY-MEDIATED DELIVERY MODES

The University has undertaken two types of innovative experiments in application of ICTs for delivery of programmes. These are:

- A. Internet-based experiments
- B. Satellite-based experiments

Internet-based Experiments

The internet-based experiments focus on meeting the needs of a select target group - a professional audience of management and information technology students. The number is relatively limited compared to the mass-based satellite-based technologies.

Virtual Campus Initiative

A combination of satellite-mediated teleconferencing; Internet and CD-ROM based learning resources has been employed for launching the "Virtual Campus Initiative". The Bachelor of Information Technology (in collaboration with the Edexcel Foundation, UK) and the Advanced Diploma in Information Technology (in collaboration with Department of Electronics, Government of India) are now on offer through the virtual campus. The methodologies evolved by the Indira Gandhi National Open University to create the virtual campus are unique, innovative and appropriate in the context of a developing country. The virtual campus avoids the existing barriers to on-line access by combining satellite-mediated teleconferencing, CD-ROMs and computer based delivery of courses. In order to meet the requirements of students without Internet access, the entire course materials have been made available on CD-ROM. Interactivity is an important characteristic of the virtual campus. The significance of this initiative needs to be viewed in the context of using existing infrastructure without additional financial outlay.

The University has established Telelearning Centres to provide for state-of-art hardware and software, computing and communications facilities to students (Figure 2). The emphasis is on enabling learners to independently access learning resources and participate in synchronous and asynchronous interaction. The components of the learning package include: live, satellite-based teleconferencing lectures; recorded lectures; practical laboratories; CBTs; internet learning resources; on-line interactive chat groups including members of the peer group, faculty and external experts.

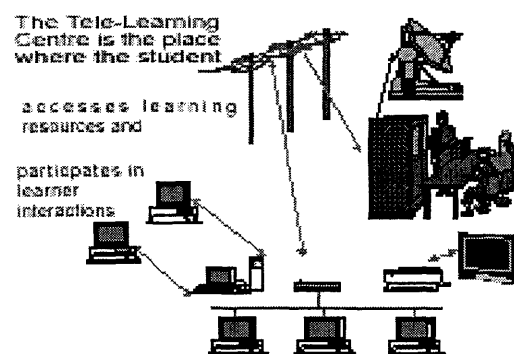


Figure 2: Virtual Campus Initiative: Tele-Learning Centres

The MEIDS project is intended to explore the potential of the web and finally aims to promote the IGNOU presence as a global educational gateway for management courses. Some of the major features of the project include: network-based interactive support system; walk-in admissions for capsule programmes; online assignment administration with quick certification; responsive, high access teaching methods; academic upgrade pathway through credit transfer and internet support for coordination and assistance for learners. Currently twenty capsule courses in management and the management programme leading to a Master's degree in Business Administration are being offered under the MEIDS project using the web as the main driver for content delivery and administration. The online facility offers online registration, continuous evaluation, access to reference material and interactivity with the Project Service Centre. Course material is provided in both print as well as downloadable format on the web. Updates of the specialization areas were sourced in web format for student reference in place of print copies to ensure timely updation of content and cost effectiveness with the increase in the number of students accessing the facility. A customized chat facility has been created and developmentally tested. An International Digital Library is also on offer to registered students on a free trial basis for the last four months. Assignments are generated online on the web for continuous evaluation comprising 30% of total evaluation. Assignments submitted online are evaluated online to give the learners grades instantly.

The University has entered into partnership with various management institutes called Partners in Advanced Learning Systems (PALS), spread across most of the states in the country, to facilitate learners access to the internet and other infrastructure facilities. Face-to-face mentor support and project guidance is provided by mentors at the PALS to which the student is attached. Processing efficiency in terms of programme management is emphasized in terms of instant registration and continuous evaluation with interactivity features. The system has been designed to be highly flexible to accommodate changes with respect to information, location and collaboration within the least possible time. It also enables quick redressal of learner's problems.

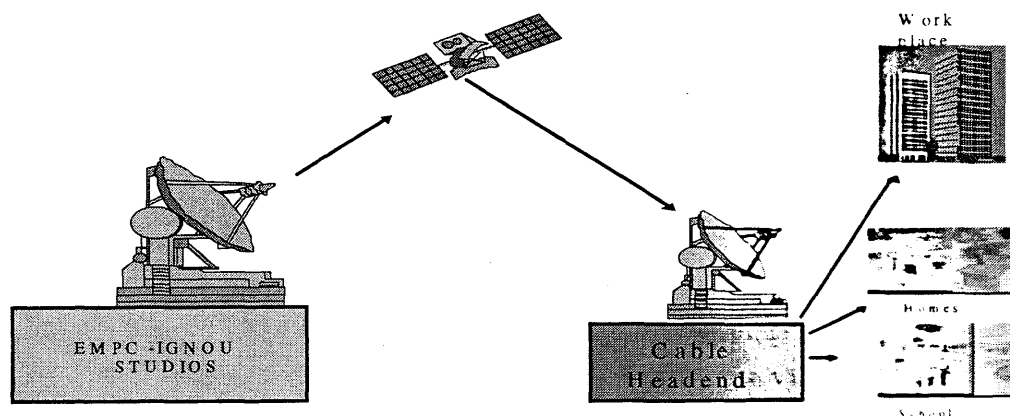
Satellite-based Experiments

Satellite-based experiments launched by IGNOU are targeted at a mass audience. The programmes are more broad-based and cover a wider canvas ranging from the professional to awareness programmes.

Gyan Darshan and Interactive TV

IGNOU has been entrusted with the prestigious and unique honour of transmitting **Gyan Darshan** - the exclusive educational TV channel of Doordarshan (India's National TV network) (Figure 3). A dynamic "TV Cooperative", the channel is a joint collaborative venture of several agencies including Ministry of Human Resource Development, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, IGNOU, Consortium of Educational Communication, University Grants Commission and National Council for Educational Research. The management of a TV Cooperative has been a unique experience for the University which has a leading role in coordinating with prominent educational software and hardware providers in operating the channel. The Programme Mix on Gyan Darshan includes core programmes in areas such as primary education, secondary education, higher education, open and distance education, extension education and technical/vocational education. Programmes on technical

education will be on offer through a network of technical training institutes and community polytechnics. Mosaic programmes include awareness programmes and programmes in areas such as health and hygiene, family welfare, arts and culture, science popularization and environment.

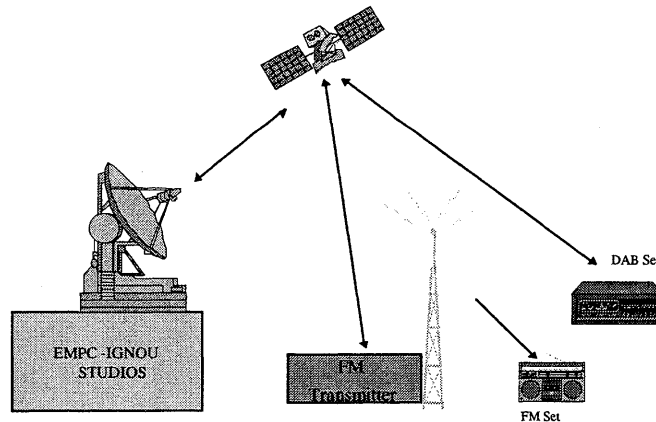


**Figure 3: Gyan Darshan
Satellite Transmission on C -
B and**

Satellite-mediated teleconferencing is being widely used by the University and other user agencies. Client groups have considerably expanded in terms of range of applications sought and size of audience reached nationwide or region-wide for training provision. Reaching the disadvantaged in remote and educationally backward districts has been a major emphasis area. The University has established technology-enhanced learning centres in such districts across the country.

Gyan Vani and Interactive radio

IGNOU has also been designated the nodal agency for **Gyan Vani**, the FM Broadcast Channel (Figure 4). After the pilot phase, Gyan Vani is expected to be relayed from 110 stations. Gyan Vani is envisaged as a complimentary model of decentralized broadcasting which will help consolidate the inputs provided by the TV Channel in building dedicated audiences. A series of brainstorming sessions are being held with identified prospective stakeholders - the social sector and educational sector representatives in the states with encouraging results.



**Figure 4: Gyan Vani :
Local and National
Broadcasting**

Interactive radio phone-in counselling is currently operational from 184 radio stations. Provision has been made for toll free telephone numbers so that learners can interact with counsellors from their homes or from study centres situated close to their place of residence. Relay of counselling sessions through TV stations and local cable TV networks would also shortly be operationalized on a large scale.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS FROM PROJECT EXPERIENCE

IGNOU experience in diversification into interactive multimedia applications has led to some significant insights. These include:

- ❖ The satellite-mediated mode is more appropriate to reach large numbers of learners as compared to the internet-based mode;
- ❖ Community-based ICT infrastructure is necessary to reach learners;
- ❖ Use of technology requires the cooperative effort of many agencies;
- ❖ Activities for ensuring learner preparedness need to be undertaken simultaneously with creation of technology -mediated delivery mechanisms;
- ❖ Learners who use the internet continue to rely on the printed version for a substantial part of the learning process;
- ❖ Flexible institutional arrangements are necessary to use the internet and satellite technologies (systems and procedures) and
- ❖ Training of resource persons is required in designing and presentation of learning materials through the internet mode.
- ❖ Face-to-face support services are still highly valued by learners.

STRATEGIES IN MANAGING STUDENT SUPPORT: OPTIMIZING VOLUME, COST AND QUALITY

The IGNOU experience highlights some useful strategies to optimize volume, cost and quality in managing student support. These include:

- ❖ Identifying the "break even" point at which it is possible to meet the needs of a large student clientele without compromising quality of student support services or increasing cost of delivery to unsustainable levels;
- ❖ Adopting flexible mechanisms for delivery by activating study centres (from the existing network) in each academic session depending on ease of access for clientele and regional enrolment pattern in that particular session;
- ❖ Learner feedback to enrich the student support services;
- ❖ Providing centrally produced and relayed materials for support services with scope for local discussion and interpretation through teleconferencing and internet modes;
- ❖ Enhancing volume at reasonable cost through choice of community access rather than individual access modes for technology-mediated support services;
- ❖ Infrastructure for community-based telelearning centres to be created by public service institutions and maintained by the community/ users;
- ❖ Promotion of community-based multiple service centres which will provide the different services to the community including educational services; and
- ❖ Expanding access in underserved regions and areas of the country through infrastructure creation, fee subsidies for disadvantaged groups and communities, remedial support services, appropriate use of information and communication technologies and promotional/publicity measures.

(Acknowledgements: The writer is thankful to Dr.(Ms.) Annu J. Thomas, Deputy Director, Vice Chancellor's Office for her help in preparing the draft of the paper)

Appendix - 1

IGNOU in Brief

	2000		2001	
Programme of Offer	50		62	
Courses of Offer	604		673	
Students Registered	196650		291360	
Students on Rolls	561167		750873	
Regional Centres	26		29	
Study Centres	504		637	
Study Centre Coordinators/Programme Incharges	725/145		444/189	
Academic Counsellors	20000		20364	
Students Registered for Term-End Examination	319004		370187	
Students Awarded Degrees/Diplomas/Certificates	53298		62369	
Blocks Printed	2662		3342	
Total Quantum of Study Material Printed	79.55 Lakhs		102.04 Lakhs	
Audio Programmes Produced	984		1051	
Video Programmes Produced	941		1102	
IGNOU Staff Strength	1677		1811	
a) Academics and other Academics	294		301	
b) Administrative (including Group-D staff)	1383		1510	
	RE (1999-2000)	BE (2000-2001)	RE (2000-2001)	BE (2001-2002)
Budgetary Provision (Rupees in Crores)	138.13	142.55	167.10	214.30
a) Non-Plan (Grant in-aid)	5.50	12.10	5.00	10.00
b) Plan (Grant in-aid)	42.82	70.00	69.10	96.30
c) Fee and others	89.81	60.45	93.00	108.00

Supporting students in open and distance learning: guidelines for facilitators offering learner support programmes

Val J Rapmund³³, Department of Psychology, University of South Africa.

Introduction

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is at present the largest open and distance teaching, tertiary institution in Africa. Tuition is provided through distance teaching, and students are assisted through an integrated support system. The aim of learner support is to assist learners to “master the skills and knowledge needed to achieve success in their studies” (Draft report on integrated learner support 1997, p.11). Learner support strategies have two distinct but interrelated functions, which are, firstly, to address the problems of distance learners in general, and secondly, to address the needs of students with special learner needs, such as those caused by previous educational disadvantage.

The focus in this study is on the support strategy of *face-to-face interaction* amongst students, and between lecturers and students. In the South African context, it would appear that “[a] substantial degree of face-to-face interaction is pedagogically essential” for students, who were disadvantaged by the apartheid system (Geidt 1996, p.19). However, although many Black students in South Africa were disadvantaged educationally by the apartheid education system, and academic support programmes might help to overcome some of the problems of educational inequality (Richardson, Orkin & Pavlich 1996), educators need to be careful not to perpetuate divisiveness by problematising these students. Programmes should be developed that are aimed at *all* students. This reflects a belief that all students can benefit by attending such programmes. This idea is based on the premise that all individuals have resources which could be used in their own healing and growth, as well as that of others (Rappaport & Simkins 1991; Saleeby 1996). Life is made up of individuals’ experiences and these experiences contribute towards the development of people’s resources which can be enhanced in the sharing of ideas and experiences in programmes.

The Student Self-Empowerment and Enrichment Programme

A programme called the Student Self-Empowerment and Enrichment Programme (SSEEP) was designed and developed for *all* second-year Psychology students at Unisa. It was presented over four days which took into account the distance teaching context where time pressure for students, many of whom are employed full-time, was an important factor. It formed part of learner support and in particular involved personal contact between lecturers and students. The ‘new’ South Africa, where the vestiges of the past still exert an influence on people despite the dismantling of apartheid structures, formed the backdrop to this study.

The programme had two primary aims: Firstly, to disseminate knowledge, and secondly, to create a domain for dialogue. It was hoped that personal growth would be experienced that would bring life-enhancing contributions to other contexts as well, such as the students’

³³Dr Val J Rapmund is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology, Unisa. This paper is based on her doctoral thesis: *Enhancing Students’ Personal Resources Through Narrative* (2000).

personal, family and community contexts, though this outcome could not be predicted. The focus of the programme was to:-

- empower and enrich students* personally on a cognitive, motivational, and emotional level, and on an interpersonal and community level.
- address problems* such as lack of comprehension of the study material, ineffective study techniques, passivity in the learning process, and poor academic performance in the answering of assignment and examination questions.
- take the distance out of distance education by letting students *work in a highly interactive way* with fellow-students and presenters/facilitators.
- enhance personal growth and foster interpersonal relationships* as students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds work together in small groups.
- focus on *personal choices and responsibility*.
- encourage community involvement* in joining and working for voluntary organisations in their area of interest.

Creating a domain for dialogue facilitated connection with others, and created spaces for the telling and sharing of stories. In dialoguing about an issue, new ideas were co-evolved, new possibilities generated, and new connections made, which tended to enrich the realities of students. Students' personal stories, as resources, emerged from silence and invisibility. Students seemed to move from the anonymity of silence to the healing of affirmation through dialogue. The focus therefore, tended to be on enhancing and harnessing resources that students contributed to the created context, rather than focussing on students' deficits. Instead of being merely the passive recipients of help, students were placed in the position of active participants in the process.

This programme was aimed at both adult learners, and students of traditional university age. The vast majority of students who attended the programme were female and tended to fall into the category of the adult learner. They appeared to represent the different ethnic groups in South Africa. The diverse nature of the student population needed to be accommodated in the programme, which, according to Thorpe (1995), is also one of the major challenges facing distance education.

Understanding Experience

The aims of this programme were much broader than merely achieving a pass at the end of the academic year. Therefore, a research approach was required that would take into account the 'voices' of both facilitators and students regarding their experiences in the programme, in order to discover the meanings that it held for them.

A qualitative research approach, consistent with the "'interpretive turn' in social science epistemology" (Rabinow & Sullivan cited in Kelly 1999, p.398), therefore seemed the appropriate starting point for inquiry of the study of human experience from within the context of human experience (Kelly 1999; Searight & Young 1994). This is based on the belief that experience can only be understood within "the social, linguistic, and historical features which give it shape" (Kelly 1999, p.398). There is, therefore, much to be learned from people's subjective interpretations, or accounts, that are "conceptually articulated in language" (Fuks 1998, p.245).

The underlying approach that informed this study was the narrative approach. According to Polkinghorne (cited in Callahan & Elliott 1996, p.92), narrative is the “human activity of ‘making meaning’” of experiences. It is coherent with “the study of everyday understandings and real world behaviour” (Callahan & Elliott 1996, p.92).

It is *people* who lead storied lives and recount stories of their lives, and it is narrative researchers who “describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, p.416). “[D]iscover[ing] and construct[ing] meaning” in texts (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, p. 423), was achieved by analysing the field texts, which in this study refer to field notes, artefacts (photographs, thank you cards and letters), and oral conversations. They “are texts created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experience” (Clandinin & Connelly 1994, p.419). In this study, hermeneutic was the method used to analyse the field notes and artefacts, and narrative analysis was the method used to analyse the research interviews. (See Rapmund 2000 for a detailed explanation of these methods of analysis.)

The following guidelines for facilitators were constructed from the themes, inferred by the researcher, that evolved from the aforementioned analyses.

Guidelines for Facilitators Working in Groups in an Educational Context

Creating a domain for dialogue; acknowledging the resources of facilitators; focussing on the role of the facilitator in facilitating group process; and, highlighting the facilitators’ role in providing students with a framework for learning, will be discussed. Finally, the conditions that facilitators should be aware of, will be referred to briefly.

Creating a Domain For Dialogue

Personal Involvement of Academics in Programmes

When a team of academics from an open and distance teaching institution, design and become personally involved in programmes, it gives them grassroots experience of where the students are ‘at’, and where they themselves are ‘at’. This reflects the experience of the facilitators involved in the SSEEPP. Contact between lecturers involved in the programme and students, ensured a better fit between the expectations of both lecturers and students. This newly acquired knowledge was subsequently used to inform the conceptualisation and writing of study material to better meet students’ needs, to design programmes for the Internet, and for future planning.

Facilitating Connection in Small Groups

Learning seems to be a social process that takes place through social interaction (Johnson cited in Szul 1995; Knights 1993; Nyikos & Hashimoto 1997). Facilitators in the SSEEPP encouraged participation and connection by forming students into small groups. In the SSEEPP chairs were arranged in circles of about eight to ten chairs, and students formed small groups on their arrival at the venues. In this way students experienced the benefits of interpersonal contact; the sharing and co-evolution of ideas; being more open to others, to the course, and in their whole personal orientation; working co-operatively together, ‘performing’ different roles such as leadership roles, participating in the group processes, and

crossing cultural and age boundaries. Facilitators, however, should be aware that groups can also hamper the learning process (Imel & Tisdell 1996).

Facilitators in the SSEEP allowed students to join a group of people with whom they felt most comfortable. Being part of a group also had the advantage of promoting a sense of manageability, as opposed to the overwhelming feeling associated with large groups. In the SSEEP, students stayed in these groups for the duration of the programme. However, some students who attended the SSEEP still seemed to prefer to work independently and to maintain personal distance from other students. It seemed that these independent students were happy to remain in their groups but tended to stay uninvolved, and this was respected. It therefore, appears that some students prefer to maintain a spectator role rather than a participatory role.

Multi-Cultural Connection

In the SSEEP, facilitators did not try to force multi-cultural connection. It seemed that the choice to join groups was best left in the hands of the students themselves. If students felt that they were 'forced' to be part of a group, it tended to exert a negative effect on all group members. In the SSEEP, it seemed that when a White student voluntarily joined a group of Black students, who were educationally more disadvantaged than the White student, the Black students tended to resort to patterns associated with the past in deferring to the White student. However, when the White student took a 'back seat' and encouraged participation from the Black students, a more equitable relationship was established which was beneficial to all. Thus it gave students the opportunity to reject the stereotypes that others try to pin on them (Knights 1993).

Resources of the Facilitator

Facilitation implies taking action. The facilitators in the SSEEP contributed a variety of skills and leadership styles, discovered novel ways of using their expertise, and added to and listened to the voices of students.

Interconnectedness and Complementarity Amongst Presenters/Facilitators

In the SSEEP a team approach was used, as it introduced not only a richness of ideas from multiple sources, but involved support, shared responsibility, different styles which seemed to meet the needs of the wide range of students, increased opportunities for different team members to connect with students, and seemed to prevent boredom amongst students. Team members should therefore be encouraged to contribute their own personal resources to the created context, be committed to each other and the programme, share a common aim, and work together (Szul 1995).

Interconnectedness among the presenters/facilitators also seemed to promote connection between presenters/facilitators and students in the SSEEP. Facilitators need to be what Anderson & Goolishian (cited in Chiari & Nuzzo 1996, p.177) refer to as "conversational artists", that is individuals who are able to create a space for conversation, and have sharpened interpersonal skills. They need "to develop capacities for dialogue, questioning, and listening, along with the necessary sensitivity to others and memory for their words" (Knights 1993, p.185).

Facilitators also shared a sense of humour. According to Fry (quoted in Gelkopf & Kreitler 1996, p.241), “[i]ndividuals who laugh together become more integrated as a psychological unit, resulting in strengthened group cohesiveness”. This seemed to be the experience of the facilitators in the SSEEP.

Facilitators as Role models

When facilitators practise certain positive behaviours or values, which may be new or unknown to students, they become role models. Facilitators, though, often mistakenly believe that they should not share their values, expectations or experiences with their audience. Naturally, this does not mean that they should force their personal values on to others, but should always respect difference in, for example, cultural and religious values. However, the value of sharing their values, expectations or experiences, has since been recognised as introducing new possibilities which one can work towards (Sporakowski, 1992). Thus facilitators have an ideal opportunity and a captive audience to demonstrate desirable behaviours which they would like their audience to learn. In the SSEEP, the presenters/facilitators modelled *subject competence and responsibility, caring and openness, respect* for one another as well as their students, *tolerance, empowerment* rather than victimisation, *getting to the point* rather than waffling, and *a work ethic* as opposed to a slack and undisciplined approach.

The Role of the Facilitator in Facilitating Group Process

Outcomes Based and Experiential Learning Narrative

What facilitators say is important because it tends to inform the students’ narrative which has a reciprocal influence on the facilitators’ narrative, and sets the tone for the ensuing process. In the SSEEP, instead of beginning a session with informational input from facilitators, facilitators elicited participants’ stories of their experiences, and then linked them to theory or course content, and then later on to a new experience to test theory (Weedon 1997). Facilitators also encouraged students to use their theoretical knowledge gained from the course content, and linked to experiences, to become involved in their communities. This would not only give them practical experience but would also uplift their communities.

Encouraging the Telling of Stories and a Focus on Strengths

A focus on creating a space for the recounting of stories, and a focus on strengths, should be built into programmes and courses. It is in the telling of stories that people make sense of their experiences and that facilitates transformation. In the SSEEP, the facilitators were prepared to share personal stories of their experiences with students, without making themselves too vulnerable, or being inappropriate, which often seemed to set the stage for the telling of stories by others (Dean, 1998). If facilitators are not prepared to share stories, they cannot expect others to do so! They also used stories of their personal experiences to assist students in their understanding of important aspects of the course material when appropriate. It seems that stories make an impact when they are authentic, if they resonate with the students’ experiential world, and if they touch a chord in students’ lives. However, facilitators should be careful not to usurp students’ stories. The telling of one’s story and the ownership thereof seem to empower the narrator. In the SSEEP, students’ stories were listened to and validated, stories were exchanged and expanded, questions were asked and meanings

explored, problems were externalised and preferred accounts created, and blaming stories were challenged, which often led to narrators embracing a different voice to the one that had dominated their thinking for many years (Dean, 1998). According to White (cited in Hart 1995), in sharing stories, different 'voices' are able to enter the story-telling process and participate in the creation of meaning through an interactive process. This facilitates change as students are encouraged to 'perform' new meaning.

The facilitators in the SSEEP focussed on stories of strengths, or resources, that participants have developed as a result of their experiences in life. In the present South Africa, it seems especially pertinent to create opportunities for students to tell their stories, especially stories that have been silenced due to oppression. According to Benard (cited in Saleeby 1996, p.301), the aim is to "reconnect people to the health in themselves" which could have an enhancing effect in their communities as well.

Facilitators also need to recognise the strengths in themselves, as well as acknowledging that they are not expert in all spheres of life. According to Anderson (cited in Becvar & Becvar 1996, p.287), the aim is for the expertise of both facilitators and students to be "engaged to dissolve the problems" and for growth to occur.

Encouraging Through Positive Reinforcement

Facilitators should encourage participation from students, which should be rewarded. It seems that this is especially important for those students who have less experience working in a group than others (Szul 1995). Positive reinforcement often seems to encourage further participation from students, not only from those who participated initially. Everyday behaviours, such as respectfulness, caring, politeness, and so on, can also be positively reinforced by facilitators. This tends to have a positive effect on the group process and on relationships.

Structure and Flexibility

In the SSEEP the facilitators devised a well-structured programme while at the same time remained open to the processes in the programme without trying to force them into a direction that suited them. Flexibility requires sensitivity on the part of the facilitators and they therefore need to meet each group where it is 'at' and not where they would like it to be. Structure seems to provide clear guidelines of what is expected of students. Material needs to be explained in a way that is coherent with the audience and facilitators need to adapt their explanations accordingly. Facilitators also need to be aware of when they are doing something which is not working and to try something else.

Facilitating different levels of academic functioning

Facilitators in the SSEEP needed to deal with students and groups functioning academically on different levels. It seemed that a higher level of academic functioning went hand in hand with a more independent way of functioning. In such cases, facilitators met students' need for independence in work-related contexts, but encouraged connection in experience-related domains. In groups that tended to be more homogenous in terms of lower level academic functioning, and where there did not seem to be anyone to initiate the group process, the facilitators was required to be more involved. In groups that were more diverse in terms of their level of academic functioning, facilitators were required to spend more time with subgroups that seemed to battle and to encourage more discussion and debate amongst

subgroups that seemed to function on a higher academic level. Facilitators also encouraged willing academically advanced students to embrace a more facilitatory and encouraging role in disadvantaged groups, so that the groups could function more effectively. Nonetheless, facilitators should accord equal status to all groups no matter what their level of functioning.

Facilitating Groups of Differing Sizes

Group size appears to be an external condition that facilitates or hinders the group process. In the SSEEP, facilitators were at times required to deal with large groups of between 150 and 400 students. In order to maintain the group process and to foster a sense of inclusiveness in large groups, facilitators *added* something to the chaos in order to balance the system. 'Technical' solutions included structuring the programme well, setting clear limits, keeping administrative requirements, such as registration, down to a minimum, using a microphone that permitted facilitators to move freely between the groups, and dividing the students into smaller groups. These technical solutions tend to emphasise 'control' strategies (Hogan & Kwiatkowski 1998). Technical solutions that focussed on independence (Hogan & Kwiatkowski 1998) included encouraging interaction among students in their smaller groups in order to give them a feeling of belonging, and working in a personal way with the groups that battled. The aim was always to try and engage as many students as possible in order to create a sense of inclusiveness.

Facilitator's Role in Providing Students With a Framework for Learning

It seems necessary for facilitators to provide students with a framework for learning that is consistent with academic requirements, and which should nonetheless include a realistic perception of where students are 'at'. This seems similar to the idea of 'scaffolding' in which "the more knowledgeable person", in this case the facilitator, "assumes the responsibility of offering the learner support to facilitate learning" (Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997, p.508). As the learner acquires the requisite skills, the supportive scaffolding is slowly removed, and responsibility is shared.

Providing Knowledge About How to Use the Study Material

In the SSEEP, students were provided with knowledge about how to use the study material. It cannot be taken for granted that students know how to use study material. It seems that many students, especially the academically disadvantaged students, do not know how to use something as basic as their study guides. Also, poverty appears to be a constraining factor to academic success as many students do not possess textbooks and try to pass without textbooks, relying only on their study guides. In some courses, study guides contain insufficient information for students to be successful in their endeavours.

Committing Ideas to Paper

It seems from the experience of facilitators in the SSEEP that many students, especially those from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, tended to battle to convert their ideas into written text. In the SSEEP facilitators provided students with a basic structure to help them get started in committing their ideas to paper, and in structuring their ideas. A basic structure served the added function of informing students about what was expected of them. Facilitators encouraged students to use the 'language' of the course, that is the terms and concepts, to help them to answer questions and to apply what they learnt in everyday situations. Facilitators also encouraged students to focus their ideas when answering

questions, to discuss salient features, to distinguish between the important and the peripheral issues, and to integrate information rather than think in a fragmented way.

Drawing on Personal Experience

In the SSEEP, it seemed that when students were required to discuss something that was part of their experiential world, they evidenced an ability to integrate information, to distinguish the important from the less important and peripheral issues, and to address questions directly. Therefore, personal experience which can be viewed as a resource, should be built into courses or programmes to assist students to do this in formal academic work (Thomas & Oldfather 1997; Weedon 1997). When facilitators link course content to the students' experiential world, then the course content is not just something 'out there', but in fact forms part of their experiential world, which makes it come alive for them. In this way, students will be able to rely on their own experiences to inform them on a subject.

Providing Rich Descriptions

It seems that many students who fail their examinations in the second- year Psychology courses (Personology and Developmental Psychology) at Unisa, provide 'thin' rather than 'thick' answers. Students in the SSEEP were therefore encouraged to provide 'thick', rich descriptions. Facilitators explained to students that questions contained clues, and students should use these clues (the facts given in the question, or the words contained therein) to ask themselves questions which can help them to provide descriptions that are richer and 'thicker'. Once again, it became apparent in the SSEEP that when students told stories about their personal experiences and their ideas about the problems in their communities and the solutions to these problems, they provided rich descriptions.

Keeping Instructions Simple

Facilitators should try and keep their instructions simple and to the point. In the SSEEP, the facilitators sometimes erred on the side of trying too hard to explain something clearly, which only served to confuse students. In addition, in order to explain a complex concept or process to the more academically disadvantaged student, the concept or process should first be explained in a 'language' that they can understand, before linking it to something else. In the SSEEP, the facilitators found it unhelpful to link a concept or process to a metaphor, for example. Also, the application of concepts or processes to real life situations need to fit the students' worlds of experience, otherwise the application will be lost on them.

Shift from an External to an Internal Locus of Control

It seems that an internal locus of control is required for academic success within an academic context. Facilitators in the SSEEP found that when students felt in control of the knowledge base of the course, perceived its relevance in their everyday lives, applied it to everyday situations and behaviour, and experienced their own feelings of enthusiasm generated by their connectedness to one another in the programme, they become intrinsically motivated. According to Oldfather and Dahl (cited in Thomas & Oldfather 1997), intrinsic motivation refers to the idea of being intensely involved in learning, curious, and engaged in a search for understanding, which is experienced as a deeply personal and a continuous process.

Realistic Self-Efficacy Perceptions

Encouraging realistic self-efficacy perceptions needs to be a major goal of facilitators so that students are able to improve in areas where they are not strong. Results from questionnaires

administered in previous years to second-year Psychology students who attended the SSEEP, indicated that students, especially the more academically disadvantaged ones, tended to have unrealistically high self-efficacy beliefs regarding their academic abilities (Moore, 1997). However, by the end of the programme, results from post-tests indicated that students had moved towards a more realistic level. It seemed that this shift occurred because their experiences in the programme provided them with a realistic base of comparison against which to assess themselves. In addition, the 'mock' exam also helped students to realise that their perceptions of their abilities tended to be somewhat inflated in comparison with what was expected of them.

Sharing Information or ideas

One of the aims of programmes such as the SSEEP, is to give students information regarding course content. However, facilitators should try and provide information on course content in a new way, rather than remaining book-bound, so that understanding is enhanced. Facilitators should also provide students with information on how to prepare for the examination which is congruent with lecturer's expectations for answering examination questions. The information narrative clarifies different aspects of a course and can therefore make the course load more manageable. Information about the course also seems to lead to self-reflection which is an important part of studying that lecturers/facilitators should build into a programme or course.

Facilitators should be aware that information seems to benefit students on another level as well. For example, in the SSEEP, it allowed students to re-invent their identities. It also appeared to provide students with an idea of the attitude required to approach their studies and how serious they were required to be. In addition, it also provided a basis of comparison against which a student could assess his or her scholarship. Information also provided an alternative to a compartmentalised way of viewing life, and exposed a person to other 'realities'. This seems very important to students impoverished by a lack of exposure to other 'realities' due to the apartheid legacy. Ideas on coping with personal problems, family relationships, or alternative ways of coping with negative behaviour from others, was also gained from sharing ideas. It seemed to open up new 'realities' and options.

It appears therefore that information 'speaks' to students in personal ways which cannot be predicted. Facilitators should be aware that their narratives, as well as students' narratives, may have unanticipated consequences.

The Role of the Relationship Between Facilitators and Students for Learning

It seems important for facilitators to be regarded as expert and competent in their particular field, as that builds respect from students. But then facilitators should also be willing to make a concerted effort to minimise the distance between themselves and students on an interactional level, to foster relationships that are more egalitarian, and initiate symmetrical ways of relating to one another, which show reciprocal respect. It therefore seems important for lecturers at a distance education institution to foster some form of personal contact with students, especially those who come from disadvantaged and under-resourced environments and to enter into a relationship with shared responsibility. Facilitators should establish healthy relationships with their students to enable them to grow both intra- and interpersonally (Mitten 1995). However, some students indicate a preference for a more hierarchical relationship between themselves and the facilitators where the roles of the

facilitators and students tend to be more familiar (Freire & Faundez 1989). In order for students to develop personally, facilitators therefore, need to persevere in establishing a more egalitarian relationship between themselves and students.

Facilitators in the SSEEP frequently belonged to a different ecological niche from their students and therefore were able to provide the difference needed to initiate change. They were often the only source of support available to students who belonged to a context where everybody seemed needy. Facilitators tried to foster respectful relationships as the cornerstone of their interaction with students and were sensitive to where students were 'at' - to allow students to make their own links and to set their own pace. In the SSEEP, the group process was facilitated by the nature of this relationship, the interactional nature of working in groups, and the more active role that students were required to play. This relationship also opened the way for students to share the role of 'giver', which was the role traditionally assigned to the teacher.

Conditions of which Facilitators should be Cognisant

Facilitators should take note of the following conditions that they may be required to deal with:

- It appears that a number of students in higher education experience **personal problems** which may relate to poor academic performance (Easton & Van Laar, 1995) and that lecturers might, at times, be required to deal with problems of a personal nature that students discuss with them. Many students at Unisa experience problems of a personal nature.
- In addition, facilitators in South Africa should take cognisance of the **authoritarian narrative** that still seems to influence students negatively and to inhibit their initiative, independence, and ability to think critically.
- Furthermore, vast inequalities still exist between Whites and Blacks in South Africa (Hirschowitz & Orkin 1997; Möller 1998). Learning is very difficult for the poor (Suransky-Dekker 1997). Facilitators also need to be aware of the damaging, isolationistic and dehumanising effects of apartheid where forced separation kept people in the same ecological niche and denied them exposure to other 'realities'.

Programmes therefore should take the diversity of contexts and experiences into account. They should encourage the articulation of narratives of survival, hope and a preferred way of being, amongst those that are disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to provide guidelines to assist facilitators, working with groups in an educational context, to support students and enhance their resources. These findings were based on experiences, including those of the researcher, her co-facilitators and the students who attended the SSEEP. Although the voice is the researcher's, it nonetheless includes multiple voices from the co-facilitators, colleagues, students, and the world in which she is embedded.

References

- BECVAR, D.S., & BECVAR, R.J. 1996. *Family therapy: A systemic integration* (3rd ed.), Allyn & Bacon. Needham Heights, MA.
- CALLAHAN, C., & ELLIOTT, C.S. 1996. Listening: A narrative approach to everyday understandings and behavior. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 17. No. 1, pp. 79-114.
- CHIARI, G., & NUZZO, M.L. 1996. Psychological constructivisms: A metatheoretical differentiation. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, Vol. 9, pp.163-184.
- CLANDININ, D.J., & CONNELLY, F.M. 1994. Personal experience methods. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln. (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.413-427). Sage. Thousand Oaks.
- DEAN, R.G. 1998. A narrative approach to groups. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, Vol. 26. No.1, pp. 23-37.
- DRAFT REPORT ON INTEGRATED LEARNER SUPPORT. 1997. University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- EASTON, S., & VAN LAAR, D. 1995. Experiences of lecturers helping distressed students in higher education. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, Vol. 23. No. 2, pp.173-178.
- FUKS, S.I. 1998. Systems theory perspective and community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 26. No. 3, pp. 243-252.
- GEIDT, J. Feb 1996. Distance education into group areas won't go? *Open Learning*, Vol. 11. No.1, pp.12-21.
- GELKOPF, M., & KREITLER, S. 1996. Is humor only fun, an alternative cure or magic? The cognitive therapeutic potential of humor. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*, Vol.10. No.4, pp.235-254.
- HART, B. 1995. Re-authoring the stories we work by : Situating the narrative approach in the presence of the family of therapists. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol.16. No. 4, pp.181-189.
- HIRSCHOWITZ, R., & ORKIN, M. 1997. Inequality in South Africa: Findings from the 1994 October household survey. *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 41. Nos. 1-3, pp.119-136.
- HOGAN, D., & KWIATKOWSKI, R. 1998. Emotional aspects of large group teaching. *Human Relations*, Vol. 51. No. 11, pp.1403-1417.
- IMEL, S., & TISDELL, E.J. 1996. The relationship between theories about groups and adult learning groups. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 71, pp.15-24.
- KELLY, K. 1999. Hermeneutics in action: empathy and interpretation in qualitative research. In M. Terre Blanche & K. Durrheim. (Eds.), *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences* (pp.398 - 420). University of Cape Town Press. Cape Town.
- KNIGHTS, B. 1993. Hearing yourself teach: Group processes for adult educators. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, Vol. 25. No.2, pp.184-198.
- MITTEN, D.1995. Building the group: Using personal affirming to create healthy group process. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, Vol. 18. No.2, pp. 82-90.
- MÖLLER, V. 1998. Quality of life in South Africa: Post-apartheid trends. *Social Indicators Research*, Vol. 43. Nos.1-2, pp.27-68.
- MOORE, C. 1997. A Self-Empowerment and Enrichment Programme: Changes in locus of control, self-efficacy and academic performance. Poster presentation: Fifth European Congress of Psychology, Dublin, 6-11 July, 1997.

- MOORE, C., VAN EDE, D., SHANTALL, T. & RAPMUND, V. 1997. A student self-empowerment and enrichment programme. *Progressio*, Vol. 19. No. 1, pp. 86-94.
- NYIKOS, M., & HASHIMOTO, R. 1997. Constructivist theory applied to collaborative learning in teacher education: In search of ZPD. *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 81. No.4, pp. 506-517.
- RAPMUND, V.J. 2000. Enhancing students' personal resources through narrative. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- RAPPAPORT, J., & SIMKINS, R. 1991. Healing and empowering through community narrative. *Religion and Prevention in Human Services*, Vol. 10, pp. 29-50.
- RICHARDSON, R.C., jr., ORKIN, F.M., & PAVLICH, G.C. 1996. Overcoming the effects of apartheid in South African universities. *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 19. No.3, pp. 247-266.
- SALEEBY, D. 1996. The strengths perspective in social work practice: Extensions and cautions. *Social Work*, Vol. 41. No.3, pp. 296-305.
- SEARIGHT, H.R., & YOUNG, R. 1994. Qualitative research and family systems medicine: A natural fit. *Family Systems Medicine*, Vol. 12. No. 2, pp.117-131.
- SPORAKOWSKI, M.J. 1992. Enhancing family life in the future: A potential for family therapists. *Family Relations*, Vol. 41, pp. 394-397.
- SURANSKY-DEKKER, C. 1997. Portraits of black schooling in South Africa. Research Report, Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa.
- SZUL, L.F. 1995. Working as part of a team. *Business Education Forum*. Vol. 50. No.1, pp. 25-27.
- THOMAS, S., & OLDFATHER, P. 1997. Intrinsic motivations, literacy, and assessment practices: "That's my grade. That's me." *Educational Psychologist*. Vol. 32. No.2, pp. 107-123.
- THORPE, M. 1995. Reflective learning in distance education. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, Vol. 10. No.2, pp. 153-167.
- WEEDON, E. 1997. A new framework for conceptualising distance education. *Open Learning*, Vol.12. No.1, pp.40-44.

Aged distance learners – perceptions and feedback on access and equity

P. Sivaswaroop, Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) Regional Centre, India

Introduction

Global Population Ageing

The world population is increasing. It was one billion in 1800, 1.7 billion in 1900 and 5.9 billion in 2000. The addition of population is accelerated and according to U.S. Census Bureau Projections by 2025 it will be 8 billion and 9.3 billion by 2050. The grey area in this is that the real growth will be in older population as explained below. Because of better medical care, the average life expectancy at birth also increased. The average life expectancy was 41 years in early 50's, 62 years in 1990s and is projected to reach 70 by 2020. In 1998, it was 65 years for Asia, 78 for Western Europe, 76 for North America. With reducing birth rate and mortality, the age structure of world population will shift continuously to older age groups. It is evident from the projection that during 1998-2025 period, world's youth population (who are less than 15 years) increase by 6%, children with less than 5 years increase by 5%. Whereas people with more than 65 years age will increase by 100%. So the world population will become increasingly older during coming decades. (US census Bureau, 1998)

Such increasing number of older people globally is known as "Population Ageing". In 1998, 580 million people are aged (60 and above) and by 2020 more than 1000 million will be aged out of which 700 million will be in developing countries. India will be second largest country with elderly population of 142 million by 2020. Over the next quarter, Europe is projected to retain its title of 'Oldest Region of the World'. The proportion of older people in Europe is 20% in 1998 and will be 25% by 2020. It will be 23% in North America and 10% in South Asia by 2020. (World Health Organisation, 1998)

In India the percentage of aged population with 60 + age are increasing slowly from 5.98% in 1991 to a projected value of 6.41% in 2001. The literacy rate is also increasing from 41% in 1981 to 65% in 1999 the urban & rural literacy is also increasing like 66% to 82% for urban and 34% to 58% from 1981 to 1999. (Asian Demographics, 2001)

Population ageing leads to health problems and also aggravates the magnitude of mental health problems. The emerging Social and Public Health consequences of ageing, especially in developing countries need to be taken very seriously. The poverty, lack of social security, urbanization and participation of woman in work force, lead to erosion of traditional forms of care for older people in the family. To respond to these issues of Ageing and Health, World Health Organization (W.H.O.) started a new program in 1995. The emphasis is on healthy ageing rather than the elderly.

Thus, the ageing of the population will be one of the world's most important social issues of coming 50 years. As such the ageing work force will increase. The median age of U.S. work

force by 2005 will be 45. More than 15% of U.S. workforce will be over 55 years. In US, over the next 25 years, the proportion of those under 18, who enter as new work force, is expected to stay constant at 24%. It is expected that older adults will be one among the three major groups of new entrants to work force along with minorities & women (Allen, 1998).

So the older workers will play a dominant role in onetime work force. Supplying workers who are capable of meeting needs in this new structure will require continual upgrading of worker skills. Lifelong learning will be vital for success in the work force of the future. Even though it is difficult to summarise and classify characteristics of an older worker, but managers describe them as having had more experience, better judgement, a stronger commitment to quality and punctuality. Many companies are bringing back many workers who went into early retirement and are using retirees in stead of temporary agency employees (Helen, 1998).

Several researchers reported that non traditional students perform better because of their motivation, maturity, life experiences and they are in academic setting with specific goals in mind and not to waste time, a valuable and scarce resource. Terry Whismant (1993) stated that in vertical grouping, the elder students interact with younger ones and they form a leadership function in addition to possible tutoring roles and younger ones are exposed to more mature levels. In turn, old ones will likely appreciate the recognition and opportunity to display their advanced maturity and experienced social and personal skills.

It is responsibility of the Governments to help this aged people to live better economically, socially and psychologically rather than survive physically. Educators also should aim to ensure that all people could develop their potential in the essentially unlimited domain of human skill and intellect.

The term 'Life long learning' is now very common. It describes the need for people to continue their education and training throughout life because they will face multiple careers in changing economies and enjoy longer lives in evolving societies. The word 'Learner' now designates a role, not a person. Thus by offering Distance Education (DE) programmes to Aged learners, they can be made to be active, mentally and socially by associating with younger learners.

Distance Education and Social Health of Aged

DE has grown faster than any other form of education over the past 25 years. In India the growth of DE is 13.1% in Higher Education (HE), whereas the growth in total enrolment in HE was only 5.3%.

Daniel (1996) stated that with more and more demand from society, the courses offered also changes. A notable example is Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) where it changed its academic profile significantly since 1990s. Its priority has moved from degree programs in liberal arts towards diploma and certificate Programmes in applied subjects. Over 2/3 enrolment is in programs related directly to employment.

Student Support Services (SSS) has been given a higher profile in recent years. Simpson defined SSS as " all activities beyond production and delivery of course materials that assist the progress of students in their studies". He says that a student has support system outside the university (i.e.) from parents, friends etc., He also says in future, SSS will be seen as a competitive edge of the Distance Education Institutes (DEI) (Simpson, 2000).

It was confirmed that the Distance learners be able to integrate their study demands with the demands of families and employment. So their progress and success depends on their success in the integration of competing demands on their time and attention rather than on background demographic variables. This integration is an individual matter and varies from person to person (Kamber, 1995).

It is stated that if both persisting and non-persisting students' experience similar barriers to their successful participation, then to continue or not to continue is purely personal or idiosyncratic. Of course, it doesn't mean that DEI cannot do anything to improve continuation. Even a single tip of positive side will tilt the decision to continue (Morgan, 1999).

Because of physical separation, successful Distance Learners (DLs) must be emotionally independent, self motivated, autonomous and capable of coping with learning problems on their own. This stress of independence often results in a high rate of dropout. Even then it is reported that most of the persisting DLs are adult, who are mature and / or self aware of their interests and needs.

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) :

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was established by an Act of India Parliament in 1985 with following objectives.

1. Impart education and knowledge through various means suited to the Open and Distance Education mode.
2. Provide not only higher education to large sections of the population, but particularly disadvantaged segments of the society.
3. Encourage, coordinate and assist Open Universities and distance education systems to uphold standards in such systems in the country; and
4. Provide National Integration and strengthen the natural and human resources of the country through the medium of education.

The whole country is under its jurisdiction and recently it is empowered to extend its services outside the country also. The University consists of 9 schools and 14 Divisions. As on date it is offering 62 programmes in English and Hindi medium and few programmes in local media. It is one of the Mega Universities as per classification of John S Daniel and was awarded "Centre of Excellence in Distance Education" by Commonwealth Of Learning (COL), Canada.

The student enrollment for 2001 year is 2,91,360 and the active students are 7,50,873. The vital statistics for IGNOU in brief for the 2000 and 2001 are as follows (Vice Chancellor's Report,2001).

TABLE I: Vital Statistics of IGNOU

	2000	2001
Programmes on offer	50	62
Students registered	1,96,650	2,91,360
Students on rolls	5,61,167	7,50,873
Regional centres	26	44
Study centres	504	626
Students awarded degrees/diplomas during the year.	53,298	62,369

To cater to the needs of a wide variety of learners, IGNOU has established a huge network of Student Support Services (SSS). It has a 3 tier structure with Head Quarters at New Delhi and 44 Regional Centres (including 17 for defence) and 626 study centres. The farthest study centre is at 2800 km. The Regional Centres are established at major state capitals and are headed by Academics in the capacity of Regional and Assistant Regional Directors. They are permanent employees of IGNOU. The Study Centres are headed by Academics in the capacity of part time Co-ordinators. They are assisted by the administrative staff. The staff at study centres are part time functionaries. The part time Academic Counsellors undertake counseling sessions as per schedule on weekends/holidays. Wherever lab sessions are required, they are held either on weekends or on continuous basis for one / two weeks. For majority of the learners, the study centre is the contact point. It is also the examination centre for their Term End Examinations.

Study centres are equipped with TV, VCR, Audio Systems, VCDs and Teleconference receiving systems along with telephone and computers. They work on a part time basis on evenings of working days and on Sundays. Students submit their assignments at the study centre. They are evaluated by the Counsellors, commented upon and awarded grades/marks. The evaluation system has two components namely continuous Evaluation and Term End Evaluation. For an 8-credit course, there will be 3 assignments out of which best two will be counted for the 25-30% weightage in final evaluation. Remaining 75-70% weightage is given for Term End Examinations (TEE). Getting minimum pass mark / grade individually in continuous Evaluation and TEE and then overall pass mark / grade, when both put together is compulsory for a particular course to be declared as successfully completed.

Aged Distance Learners (ADL)

In his recent book on "Supporting students in Open and Distance Learning," Simpson (2000 p135) stated that old age learners may not need special provisions. A literature data base search in ICDL Library gave 19 records for the education of the elderly. Various studies have taken different age as to specify an old age. For example, Kelly *et al.* (1988) took 60 years and studied the effects of teaching system on the older students. Because in India, the general retirement age is 55 years, it is felt that it is appropriate to take this as cut off age.

Sample

Every year admissions are made during June – September, for the Academic year starting from next January. Sample is selected from Hyderabad Region which has state of Andhra Pradesh as its operational Region in such a way that all those who have completed 55 years of age as on 1st January of the academic year are sorted out. The admission data for the Last 10 years (i.e.1991-2000) of the Hyderabad Region was taken.

A total of 72 students were found who have completed 55 years as on 1st January of the Academic year. The total enrolment in the Region during this period is 64884, but those above 55 years is only 72 amounting to 0.11%. The possible reasons for this very low fraction of aged people is described below. The demographic details of this sample are as follows.

TABLE II: Demographic Details of the Sample

Characteristic	No of Learners
Total	72 (100)
1. Gender:	
Male	69 (96%)
Female	03 (4%)
2. Geographical Location	
Urban	49 (68%)
Town	17 (24)
Rural	06 (08)
3. Age	
55-56	18 (25)
57-58	20 (28)
59-60	12 (17)
55-60 (total)	50 (70)
61-65	13 (18)
66-70	06 (08)
Above 70	06 (08)

The figures in parenthesis indicate percentage.

The above table indicates that the aged learners in this sample are male dominated. Even though in the overall enrolment of IGNOU female learners are about 25%. Also it is more urban oriented and the rural learners are fewer. Perhaps this could be because of urban location of the study centres in the State. Out of 30 study centres in the state 16 are in the State capital and total 22 centres in the urban areas of the State. In addition, there are strong Distance Education Institutions in the state, (one State Open University and 8 Dual mode universities) which offer their programmes in the local medium and which have their study centres in the town and rural areas also. IGNOU however offers the majority of programmes in English and some in Hindi (official language of the country) only. So persons with capabilities of studying in English only prefer to join IGNOU. Because of old age, they may find it convenient, if the study centre is nearer to them. Of course there will be exceptions and few such cases are explained below.

In the age wise distribution, it can be seen that 70% of the aged learners are between 55-60 only.

Programme wise distribution

The preference of the old learners is studied by analysing which program they prefer IGNOU offered 13 programmes in 1991 and it increased to 50 programmes in 2000. The programmes vary from liberal art graduate Programme to professional, vocational programmes. In this regard John Daniel (1996) commented that during 1990s IGNOU has changed significantly in its academic profile from degree programmes in liberal arts towards diploma and certificate programmes in applied subjects. The year wise enrollment in IGNOU is also increasing, indicating that IGNOU programmes are addressing the varying needs of a vastly heterogeneous group of learners.

The All India enrolment in 2000 was 1,96,650 whereas for the Hyderabad Region was 11,578. The enrollment in various programmes varies with time. The enrollment was highest in Bachelors Degree Programme during initial years of the decade, then management Programme was highest during middle of the decade, now it is computer programmes which register highest number of students.

During Academic year 2000, the distribution is as follows:

TABLE III: Preference of learners in IGNOU

	<i>Enrollment</i>	
	Total	Computer programmes
All India	1,96,650	93,146 (47%)
Hyderabad Region	11,578	7,586 (66%)

The general preference of aged learners is discussed below.

TABLE IV: Preference of Aged Distance Learners

Programme	No. of learners
Total aged learners	72
I. Undergraduate	
1. Non Formal-Preparatory (BPP)	04
2. Formal – BA	01
II. Management:	
1. Through Entrance Exam (DIM/MBA)	07(10%)
2. Direct Entry (DMM/DHRM)	03
III. Computers	
1. Awareness Certificate Programme (CIC)	10(14%)
2. Diploma Programme (DCO)	01
3. Masters Degree (MCA)	03
IV. Distance Education	
1. Diploma Programme (DDE)	07(10%)
2. Masters Degree (MADE)	01
V. Library Science	
1. Bachelors Degree (BLIS)	01
2. Masters Degree (MLIS)	02
VI. Creative Writing in English (DCE)	09(12%)
VII. Other Certificates	
1. Food & Nutrition (CFN)	03
2. Environmental Studies (CES)	02
3. Teaching of English (CTE)	01
VIII. Other Programmes	
1. Bachelors Degree in Nursing (BSCN)	01
2. PG Diploma in Maternal & Child Health (PGDMCH)	01
3. Advanced Diploma in Construction Management (ADCM)	01
4. Tourism studies	02
5. Rural Development (DRD)	04
6. PG Diploma in Journalism & Mass Communication (PGJMC)	06 (8%)
7. Diploma in Higher Education (DHE)	02

Figures in Parenthesis represent as percentage among aged learners.

Among this small group, above tiny figures indicate a preference by adult learners for other than routine courses. For example DCE, PGJMC, DDE, MBA and finally CIC are preferred. Keeping in view the general trend of the present society for Information Technology (IT) and the enrollment in IGNOU, the choice for CIC is obvious. Aged people don't want to be C-illiterates (Computer illiterates). In the words of a retired Chief Engineer, while pursuing CIC programme said, "My grand children are laughing at me that I don't know A, B, C of computers. So I am studying this Programme." Besides knowing new things, they prefer to sharpen their presumed skills by joining programmers like creative writing in English, Journalism & Mass Communication. Programme like B.Sc. (Nursing), PGDMCH, and ADCM are meant for professionals like nurses, doctors and diploma engineers.

Continuation Patterns:

Most of the programmes are either one-semester/year duration, where reregistration is not required for continuation. Among the above, there are programmes like BPP,BDP,DIM,MBA,MCA,BSc(N), BTS and ADCM which need reregistration. This will show whether they are capable of or their interest is sustained to continue further. The reregistration data for this is analysed in respect of how many have paid fees for one semester/year, and continued further. It is given in following Table.

TABLE V: Continuation Patterns of ADLs

<i>Programme</i>	Total	Registered initially only	Continued further
1. DIM/MBA	07	04	03
2. BPP/BDP	05	03	02
3. MCA	03	01	02
4. B.Sc. (N)	01	-	01
5. BTS	01	-	01
6. ADCM	01	01	-

This shows that good number of aged learners are continuing their studies further.

Feedback from aged learners

Questionnaires were posted to a random sample of 30 ADLs along with a self addressed stamped envelope. Many letters were returned undelivered stating 'Left the place' etc. This is understandable in view of the aged learners. Four replies were received, but a study of them confirm that as such they don't need any special support than the younger ones. This is in consonance with the Simpson's view (p.138: 2000). In the study on " Older students in

Adult Education” edited by Stephanie Clennell and reviewed by Midwinter (1987), it was reported that older students differ relatively little in their needs and that they are energetic and well organized adults. About one fifth of that sample are aged over 60, whereas in the present study they are about 30%.

One of the common comment by the respondents is that age is not a criteria to be discriminated for learning activity. They are confident of their experience and state that is was advantageous in their studies.

(a)Attending counselling Sessions: In IGNOU, attending counselling sessions is optional, for many programmes. Two of the respondents stated they have attended sessions, while the other two never attended, It may be note worthy that those who never attended are away from their study centres and the attendance is optional. Combined their experience, with these, their non-attendance is not abnormal. Out of the two, who attended counselling, one is Retired Air Vice Marshal and states he attended sometimes even though attendance is optional and he stays local to the study centre. Whereas the fourth one is a lady, who pursued her B.Sc. (N) is non-local but attended regularly. The attendance for B.Sc. (N) is compulsory. It is generally observed that for B.Sc. (N), students do attend counselling sessions regularly, even though they stay at distances about 600 Km away from Study Centre also. One of the aged learner expressed his feelings: “Before attending Counselling Session, I was timid, feeling about other younger ones. But once I attended and saw people older to me, I felt relieved. Later we became closer and association continued”.

(b)Submission of Assignments: As stated earlier, submission of assignments is an essential component of Studies in IGNOU. Three of the respondents were regular in submitting the assignments and the other one states he still have time to submit them. As such, IGNOU provides 4 semesters /years to complete a registered course. So the fourth one is mentioning that. Even the one, who never attended counseling sessions, was also regular in submitting the assignments.

They were asked to explain whether they had any advantage or disadvantage during their studies, because of their age. It is on following aspects. One of the respondents who never attended made no comments.

© Counseling: One, who never attended, stated age factor is disadvantageous and also he is non-local. The B.Sc. (N) student stated “I felt so happy on counseling from my younger generation. They are having more knowledge.” The Retired Air Vice Marshal “... Some difference in the counselors when addressing me. I experienced no problems at all.”

(d) Assignments: They could provide several more examples in their Assignment responses with their vast experience and state that they were well appreciated by the evaluators.

(e) Examinations: They commented that examination and evaluation are good.

- (f) Majority of them stated in affirmative that when they visited Study / Regional centre they are respected in view of their age.
- (g) They were asked to state any specific example where their age was advantageous. The senior Defence Officer States “it was not age, but experience, status and personality combined with sincere hardwork that generates advantage”. Very true! It is also same view by another respondent. The Nursing student states that she could get more respect and response from the counselors.
- (h) Regarding disadvantage, one has said that being old, he is slow in reading and irregular. Other two said ‘no disadvantages’ and also “in education, no age please. Throughout my life, I like to learn new subjects”.
- (i) Whether they felt need for any special assistance during the studies, all unanimously stated ‘NO’.
- (j) About successful completion of programmes registered, two of them have completed. One states that still he has time to complete. But the lady B.Sc. (N) learner states that she had heart problem, so she couldn’t complete.
- (k) When they are asked to state any thing they would like to, following are responses.
- B.Sc. (N) Lady: “Age is not criteria. Learning new things to gain knowledge is very important. I am very grateful to IGNOU”.
- Retd. Air Vice Marshal: “... However ‘Age’ should represent experience, which added to knowledge/skills, is supposed to generate ‘wisdom’-if such attribute really exists. An active mind never ceases to learn and learning keeps the mind active. I will be a student again in 2001 with IGNOU”.

Conclusions:

Even though the sample is tiny, but indicates a representative sample of old learners, especially from a developing country like India. The main conclusions are:

- (a) The aged learners prefer awareness courses like CIC and other than routine courses offered by other Institutions.
- (b) They are committed in their studies like attending counseling sessions, submitting assignments etc.
- (c) They don’t need any special arrangements because of their age.
- (d) Besides academic achievement, by joining a DE Programme, they can become socially and mentally active by interacting with same age or younger ones during their studies.
- (e) The respondents are highly committed and educated.

With the increasing privatization and introduction of Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) by various organizations in the country, the active old people have to find newer opportunities. For that they need better skills, which can be improved through Distance Mode. As a result demand for job oriented programmes will be more from aged learners also. To meet such demands and to provide better student support services to an average ADL, a deeper study on a larger sample is to be undertaken.

References

- ALLEN, J.M. & WIRCENSKI, D.M. (1988) Training Older Learners : Issues for the New Millennium: in Age share Research & Education Briefs, University of North Texas
- Asian Demographics (2001) available at
<<http://www.asiandemographics.com/sumindia.htm>>
- CLENNELL, S (1987) Older Students in Distance Education review in Open Learning, 4(1) (1989)
- DANIEL S .JOHN (1996) 'Mega Universities and knowledge Media Technology Strategies for Higher Education' Kogan Page Ltd, London..
- KELLY, P.,CUTRESS, N & PALMER, F. (1988) Distance Education and the Older Student, 14th ICDE Conference Oslo, ed. By D.SEWART AND J.S.DANIEL
- KEMBER, D (1995) Open learning courses for Adults: A model of student progress, Ednl.Tech.Publications, New Jersey.
- MORGAN K CHRISTOPHER & MAUREEN TAM (1999) Unravelling the complexities of Distance Education Student Attrition, Distance Education, 20(1), pp.96-108
- SIMPSON, O (2000) Supporting students in open and Distance learning, kogan Page Ltd, London
- TERRY WHISNANT,W, JOHN C.SULLIVAN, SUSAN L SLAYTON (1993): 'The "Old" New Resource for Education – Student Age', The Community Service Catalyst, XXII (3).
- US Census Bureau (1998) World population profile:1998-Highlights, available at
<<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/Wp98001.htm>>
- Vice Chancellor's Report (2001) IGNOU Twelfth Convocation, New Delhi
- World Health Organisation (1998) Population Ageing : A Public health Challenge, Fact Sheet No.135, available at
<<http://www.who.int/int.ts/en/fact135.html>>

'Did we meet your learning needs?' exploring the experience of postgraduate learners in distance education in South Africa

Trudie Steyn

The review of quality in learning programmes comes at a time when concern for quality in higher education is at an all time high (Nielsen 1997:288; Eaton 1999:26). In a period when consumer choice and customer perception of quality is cardinal, institutions which can offer quality in terms of product and customer service will survive and prosper (Jenkins 1991:97). The notion of quality in education is not new (Rinehart 1993:260). What is new is that the quality philosophy, quality management (QM), already applied successfully in business and industry, is being adapted to solve problems encountered in educational institutions (Wilson 1993:62; Daugherty 1996:83).

QM focuses on achieving quality and can be defined as a philosophy and a set of guiding principles that aim at meeting and exceeding the needs and expectations of various external and internal customers (Bradley 1993: 169; Herman 1993: 2; Pike & Barnes 1994: 24; Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:26). The second focus is on the acceptance and pursuit of continuous improvement as the only useful standard or goal of attaining quality.

The quality approach is also applicable to distance education where teaching and learning is separated in terms of time, place and space. Learning at a distance while attending only a few on-campus seminars is an option for learners who are employed as educators and wish to improve their qualifications and develop professionally (Purnell, Cuskelly & Danaher 1996:76). Although distance education is in many ways similar to teaching face-to-face, the experiences of teaching and learning at a distance are different since participants are separated from one another and their communication is mediated through written material and/or electronic means (Wolcott 1995:39). This environment also has the potential for increased interpersonal distance due to fewer opportunities for contact and the lack of feedback. Acknowledging that the physical separation of educators and learners poses actual and perceptual obstacles, learners' views on their own learning offer crucial information for reflection (Van Niekerk & Herman 1996:44; cf Sherry, Fulford & Zhang 1998:4). Literature indicates that learner-based evaluation and reflection are generally accepted when the intended application is support for improvement of learning (Sherry et al 1998:20). Recent policy developments in higher education in South Africa stress the evaluation of the quality of learning, and, in particular, the significant role of learner evaluation in this process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To improve the delivery of distance education, it is crucial to understand the needs and demands of learners (Purnell *et al* 1996:76). Different approaches to teaching and learning in distance education intensify the need to monitor the quality of the learning experiences of geographically dispersed learners (Sherry et al 1998:5). The following question provided the organising framework for the study: to what extent does the learning material and assessment

system of a module in Personnel Management meet the needs and expectations of the learners? In answering this question, the article:

- provides an overview of the module in Personnel Management;
- explains the development of the assignment and assessment system;
- explains the quality assurance process followed in designing and redesigning the module
- determines the learners' perceptions of the module;
- proposes how the learning material and assessment system could be improved to meet the needs and expectations of the learners.

For the purpose of this article, the perception of learners as customers is used to determine the quality of the learning experience in the postgraduate module in Personnel Management.

THE APPROACH TO THE MODULE PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

The B Ed degree with a specialisation in Educational Management is a postgraduate course offered through distance education at the University of South Africa. The specialisation comprises four modules including Personnel Management. The course serves as both preservice management training for many learners who are teachers as well as inservice training for learners who are school principals, deputy principals, heads of departments or employed in regional or head offices of Departments of Education.

The main approach to learning materials underlying Personnel Management is similar to that of the *Learning Paradigm* (Steyn 1997:81). According to the latter the learners are the main agents in the process who actively discover their own meaning by being involved in doing things and thinking about their actions (Barr & Tagg 1995:21). This allows practitioners to reflect on actions and to identify alternatives for improved future performances (Tanner & Jones 1994:415; Hobson 1996:45). Within the Learning Paradigm reflective practice therefore plays a significant role whereby practitioners (the learners) reflect on past and present actions to improve future performances in their practices (Kottkamp 1990:183; Hart 1990:153). This approach was considered appropriate for the professional development of educational managers in Personnel Management because it allows for learners' (practitioners) reflection in and on action (Schön 1995:34; Griffin & Kilgore 1995:56). Leder (1993:6) agrees that learners should be active participants in the learning process and not merely passive recipients of information transmitted to them by others. In this approach the model of the lecturer as expert has given way to the educator as facilitator in the teaching and learning process (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:150; Houser & Vaughan 1995:9).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASSIGNMENT SYSTEM

The assignment system for Personnel Management during 1996 and 1997 encompassed the following:

- Assignment 01 required learners to carry out a variety of tasks dealing with the management of school staff.
- Assignment 02 required different role play exercises within the context of school management.
- Assignment 03 was an essay-type assignment based on a topic chosen by the learners and involving a mini-research project on a problem in their

school/organisation.

A review of learners' responses enrolled in 1996, the so-called "voice of the customers" raised concern about the process whereby feedback was given to learners on their assignments, the so-called "the voice of the process" (cf Greenwood & Guant 1994:45). Moreover, contact with learners showed that frequently learners only noted general comments on the assignments; they tended to forget part of the content of the assignment after six weeks, the general time span required to return an assignment to a learner. This brought into question the level of learning considering when feedback to the assignments was provided. It was assumed that if knowledge and skills could be inculcated within a shorter time span, the quality of learning would improve. Lecturers were also concerned about many telephonic requests for extension of the deadline for submission of assignments. If learners planned the completion of assignments better, the process could be more effective. Considering the above, in Scherkenbach's terms, the two "voices", that of the customer and the process, were out of line and needed to be realigned (cf Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:47). This paved the way for adaption of the assignment and assessment process.

Consequently, in 1998 a single, extensive assignment consisting of ten activities linked to the ten topics covered by the module, was set. The assessment procedures were again determined after consulting an instructional designer. A progressive assignment consisting of various knowledge and skill building activities covering all the topics was designed. A complete memorandum received upon registration was compiled and served as a reference and a marking schedule. Each activity also included a mark allocation as had been recommended by the 1996 learners. A suggested timetable for completion of these activities throughout the year was provided to promote planning of the work. The activities were designed to reflect learners' personal involvement in their practical situations to eliminate copying of answers. Before submitting their assignments, learners were required to award themselves marks according to the marking schedule provided in the memorandum.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE MODULE: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

I was initially assigned to teach this module in 1993. After a review of recent literature, the Learning paradigm and reflective practice paradigm previously referred to were adapted. This was a major paradigm shift and learning materials had to be adjusted accordingly for 1994.

Reflection on my own teaching during 1994 led to the realisation that the teacher cannot be the sole role player and certain strategies were needed to assure quality. A number of quality assurance activities were used in the module:

- *A focus group interview with role players to determine the 'content' of learning material.* There is a need for frequent stakeholder assessments and meaningful dialogue and reconciliation among learners (Nielsen 1997:306). Nielsen (1997:306) suggests the following groups for such dialogues: learners; teaching staff and instructional designers; and government agencies. During 1995 role players consisting of an official of the Department of Education, two colleagues from other universities, two school principals, an instructional designer, lecturers involved in the BEd Specialisation Education Management and two learners

enrolled for the specialisation course were invited to participate in a discussion aimed at identifying key learning areas for educational managers. Thus, the importance of topics which formed part of the existing modules were determined and others suggested.

- *The course team, a non-hierarchical team which works collaboratively to work and rework draft materials.* The module has been developed and reviewed incrementally (cf Lee 1996:63). The course team comprised the lecturer involved in writing the learning material, an instructional designer whose task was to regulate the work of the team and to provide a link between the author, the editor and graphic designer as well as services participating in the production of the learning material. A self-contained, stand-alone study guide together with a reader consisting of articles on relevant topics was developed and reviewed (cf Goodwin-Davey & Davey 2000:6). The visual layout, that is visual detail, readability, interactivity strategies, graphics, icons, the style sheet and the type of 'look' that a text gives, were considered (cf Goodwin-Davey & Davey 2000:8).
- *Peer review of learning material.* After recommendations from the instructional designer and graphic designer were implemented, the learning material was reviewed by two external experts: an international reviewer in the appropriate field of study and a potential learner. Only the international reviewer suggested minimal adjustments which were implemented.
- *The appointment of an external examiner.* This external examiner worked with the first examiner in all matters such as approval of the exam paper, memorandum and monitoring of scripts.
- *Collection of feedback from learners.* Quality assurance through effective internal verification is important (Menmuir 1995:44).

RESEARCH METHODS

According to Weller and McElwee (1997:209), experience and intuition are not sufficient to base decisions on. Thus, two methods suggested by Ramsden and Dodds (1989:17) and Prosser and Trigwell (1990:141) were used to collect feedback from learners.

According to the first method, questionnaires were sent to learners during 1996 and 1997 to determine their perceptions of the assignment and assessment system. The questionnaire consisted of 80 items and took the form of a compulsory assignment which earned ten credits automatically on submission. The questionnaire covered learners' biographical details and an evaluation of the three assignments. Although the data had indicated a positive response, the need arose to improve the process in the interests of continuous improvement (Swift, Ross, & Omachonu 1998:95).

To determine learners' perceptions of the new improved assignment and assessment system, another questionnaire comprising 94 items was designed. This questionnaire was employed for learners enrolled during 1998 and learners enrolled during 1999. There were ten sections in the questionnaire, dealing with each activity in the assignment respectively. More or less similar aspects in each activity were measured in the subsection: ability of activity to hold learners' interest; whether the activity was understood; relevance of the activity for practice; whether the activity could be completed within the suggested time allocation in the timetable;

and marks obtained after marking the activity. The opportunity for comments at the end of the questionnaire focussed on learners' perception of their learning experiences.

According to the second method of obtaining feedback, qualitative data were collected during an Educational Management seminar in August 1996 where learners who attended the seminar were divided into small groups. Two questions were posed: *How did you experience the content of the module?* and *What was your experience of the assignments set in the module?* A member of each group was responsible for preparing a written report of the group's response. 64 responses were collected. Additional qualitative data were collected during a similar seminar held in September 1998. Two questions were asked: "*What are your perceptions of the assignment and assessment system in Personnel Management?*" and "*How has the assessment affected your learning?*" 'Rich' expressions enabled learners to give a true reflection of their feelings and experiences. 37 responses were collected. The qualitative responses gathered in 1996 and 1998 were read and reread. A number of categories were generated by learners' responses which employed the same or more or less the same words or concepts.

FINDINGS

In this section the 1996, 1998 and 1999 quantitative data and the 1996 and 1998 qualitative data are briefly discussed.

Quantitative data (1996)

A total of 471 (89,5%) responses to questionnaires during 1996 was recorded and analysed. 38,4% of respondents were males and 60,9% were females. 10,2% of the respondents used their mother tongue as medium of instruction; 89,4% of the respondents used a second or third language.

The questionnaire requested respondents to rate their experiences of Assignment 01. It emerged that Assignment 01 was relevant to practice (97,7%), it improved learners' understanding of the content of the topics (96,4%) and it succeeded in developing their management skills (97,9%).

A number of questions dealt with learners' experience of Assignment 02. The responses were very positive: the relevance of the assignment to learners' practice presents a score of 96,8%; how the assignments helped them to understand the content of the module, 95,4%; and how the assignments improved their management skills, 98,9%. When designing Assignment 02 I envisaged that participants in the role play would both act as tutors and also benefit from their involvement. According to the responses this aim was reached: 93,5% of the learners acknowledged that they had learnt from the participants in the role play and 93,4% believed that participants had also gained from the experience. The importance of this assignment and the view expressed that it should be compulsory in future reflected a 93,3% and 85,6% response respectively. 96,6% of the learners felt that their confidence in working with people had improved after completion of the assignment and 97,1% of the learners maintained that the assignment enhanced their self-knowledge by identifying their strong and weak points.

Assignment 01 had a self-assessment component as only two questions were marked by the lecturer and the rest were evaluated by the learner according to a marking schedule provided. The value of Assignment 02 lay in its completion and thus, no marks were awarded although a memorandum was included when the assignments were returned to the learners. According to QM, results of tests and examinations do not necessarily reflect a learner's progress or learning experience (Arcaro 1995:64). Marks should rather be de-emphasised and life-long learning emphasised instead (Fields, 1993:62). This assignment also had a self-assessment component as learners were requested to compare their answers to those of the lecturer. Although most learners indicated that self-assessment is a good strategy (88,2%), a small percentage (10,2%) did not regard the strategy as effective. Possibly this is because learners are accustomed to lecturers correcting assignments and awarding marks. This supports the traditional perception among learners that lecturers know and can; learners do not know and can't.

Quantitative data (1998 and 1999)

A total of 303 questionnaires of learners enrolled in 1998 were analysed which is 62,3% of the total population (468) enrolled for the module. A total of 274 questionnaires of 1999 learners were analysed. This is 79,2% of the total population (346) enrolled for the module. An extra two weeks were allowed for the submission of late questionnaires which could explain the improved response of 1999.

According to biographical data, most learners in both years were women: 67,9% during 1998 and 71,6% during 1999. This indicates an increase in the number of women learners since 1996. This may be partly explained by the new environment created by the South African Constitution which bans gender discrimination, thus many women envisage themselves as potential educational managers. Moreover, men might consider it unlikely that they would be appointed as educational managers above women applicants as a result of the Employment Equity Bill, thus inhibiting their choice of studying Educational Management.

The biographical data also indicated the medium of instruction. Learners who were not using their mother tongue as medium of instruction (94,0% during 1998 and 92,3% during 1999) may have experienced difficulty in understanding the learning material, completing and assessing the assignments within the suggested time limit.

As indicated earlier, the ten sections were designed to determine learners' experience of each of the ten activities in the assignment. These activities correspond with the ten topics in the study material. A number of items in the sections were similar. Table 1 indicates the range of responses to certain items.

TABLE 1: RANGE OF RESPONSES TO ITEMS IN THE ACTIVITIES

ITEM	RANGE: STRONGLY AGREE/ AGREE 1998	RANGE: STRONGLY AGREE/ AGREE 1999
The subactivities of activity X succeeded in holding my interest.	91,7 - 95,6%	92,6 - 96,3%
I understood the activities asked. (79,2%)	92,7 - 96,0%	93,4 - 97,0%
The work which is covered in the activity is relevant for my practice.	90,0 - 97,0%	90,8 - 98,2%
I can identify with the case study used in the activity (Activity 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)	87,0 - 93,3%	86,7 - 92,2%
It was easy to write a case study (Activity 6, 9)	78,3 - 86,9%	78,3 - 82,5%

When the responses of 1998 and 1999 are compared, there is no significant difference. Learners in general reviewed the various statements positively. This indicates that the activities were sufficiently challenging to hold their interest, that learners understood what was required and that the activities were relevant for their practice. Learners responded less positively to the writing of their own case studies. The vast majority of learners who were studying through their second or third language may account for the difficulties experienced in writing the case studies.

Table 2 indicates responses of learners to particular learning activities, such as the interviews and role play sessions which were included in a number of activities.

TABLE 2: RESPONSES TO GENERAL COMMENTS OF THE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

ITEM	STRONGLY AGREE/ AGREE 1998	STRONGLY AGREE/ AGREE 1998
I learnt a lot about my organisation (school or otherwise) by conducting the different interviews.	98,0%	98,9%
By conducting interviews I developed my management skills	98,3%	97,8%
I learnt a lot by doing the role play exercises.	96,3%	98,2%
Role play exercises developed my confidence.	97,3%	96,7%

Role play exercises developed my knowledge in that particular area.	97,0%	95,9%
Role play exercises developed my skills in that particular area.	97,3%	95,3%
The level of difficulty of activities is acceptable for B Ed learners.	90,2%	91,5%

The responses in Table 2 indicate that both the interviews and role play exercises played a significant role in developing learners' knowledge, skills and even confidence in management areas in their particular practice. The level of difficulty of activities was also viewed positively.

Referring to the learners' initial knowledge of Personnel Management, only 10,6% and 11,4% rated their management competence before completing the activities in the assignment as good or excellent. Regarding the statement "I feel better equipped after completing the assignment", 97,3% and 99,6% indicated agreement during 1998 and 1999 respectively. As was mentioned earlier, the activities in the assignment required learners' active participation in various management areas. The successful completion of these activities contributed to the learners' experience of increased competence. In providing a learning environment which supports higher-order critical skills, learners developed metacognitive skills that enabled them to learn in various situations in which they might find themselves as professionals (cf Hobson 1996:56). These skills entail the development of thinking and decision-making skills and skills for evaluating their actions (Hobson 1996:56).

Qualitative data (1996)

The two open questions asked during the 1996 seminar provided the main categories for the analysis: Learners' perceptions of the content of the module and their perceptions of the assignment system.

1 Perceptions of the content of the module

Comments as regards the accessibility of the content such as "easy to understand", "straight forward", "to the point", "down to earth" "clearly written", and "explicitly explained" were recorded. The structuring of the content was also appreciated with phrases, such as "well compiled" and "well presented".

Groups also referred to the "challenging", "thought provoking", "enriching", "motivating", "refreshing", "excellent"; "brilliant" "very exciting"; "dynamic"; "empowering", and "never boring" nature of the content. Several groups also indicated that the content required their "active participation" and "involvement in activities and exercises". One group of learners acknowledged that the content is "clear and understandable, yet requires much time and practice." Considering the high percentage of learners who do not study by means of mother tongue, their comments are understandable.

Many groups agreed that the material is “very practical”, “practical”, work related” and “depicts real life situations”. One specific comment succinctly described learners’ experience: “We appreciate the content as it is practical and that shows a lot of research had been done”. A common complaint about distance education curriculum is that it is out of touch with the learning needs of practitioners (Nielsen 1997:300). Often material is designed in offices where authors recall their own past experiences which are out of touch with real, current practice. Fortunately the learners’ responses contradict this notion. A few groups said the material “helps us to solve problems in our schools” and “improves our way of doing things in the school”. According to Nielsen (1997:301), the most challenging aspect of quality distance learning is the provision of appropriate practitioner experiences.

2 Perceptions of the assignment system

The comment “The standard of the assignments was very high” succinctly explains the perception of many groups. Two groups, however, referred to the difficulty of the assignments illustrated by the statement: “It was difficult to approach the assignments, but after finishing them you feel great that you’ve achieved something” . A few groups indicated that the assignments were “too long” and that “length requires more time” for completion.

Many groups thought that the assignments were “thought provoking”, “enriching”, “eye opening”, “empowering”; “exciting”, “enjoyable”, “required insight and commitment from a student”; “required active participation” and “very demanding, but gave us a lot of practice in the field of education” were recorded. One group even said that the assignments succeeded in “changing us from lazy to hard working learners”. The assignments also succeeded in preparing learners for further studies as was explained by one group “It is a good way to prepare us for Master’s degrees”. Three groups indicated that the assignments were “time consuming” although one felt that they were nevertheless “good”. One group explained their concern as regards the assignments: “The assignments require a lot of co-operation from other staff. They may not be interested.” In itself this may be of concern to the learner, but nevertheless provides an opportunity to develop negotiation and communication skills.

Many groups indicated that assignments were “very practical”; “relevant to the school situation” and “address real problem situations in the school”. A few groups agreed that the assignments “developed certain management skills”; and helped them “to solve our problems at our different schools.”

Findings and discussion of 1998 learners’ written responses

The overall views of learners were very positive about the assignment and assessment system. After reading and rereading the data, preliminary categories emerged. From these a number of categories have been identified.

1 Judgement of the assessment system as a whole

Most responses concerning self-assessment ranged from “It is a good system”; “It is exciting to have the opportunity to evaluate your own work”; to “We like the assessment system”. Although most groups responded very positively, five groups expressed their concern. One

group explained: "Self-assessment may be regarded as important to the university, but to us it is not important because we doubt ourselves until the lecturer has marked it."

2 *Learners' affective experience of the assessment system*

A few groups expressed their views on how the assessment system affects them positively. One group in particular stated: "The assessment motivates us to become responsible for our studies". One of the three responses in this category summarise the negative feeling about self-assessment: "The self-assessment system makes us nervous, because we don't feel relaxed when we think of the assessment coming ahead". This last group, however, acknowledges that self-assessment "reinforces hardworking in the part of the student".

3 *Learners' participation in their learning*

A number of groups said that the system assisted them to take responsibility for their own learning. "Self-assessment teaches us to control our work and be responsible". Most groups also indicated the positive influence of self-assessment on their learning: "Self-assessment is the best way for Postgraduate learners in that it helps them to determine their progress in a continuous manner"; and "It [self-assessment] makes us to work actively... it facilitates our learning". No negative responses were recorded in this subcategory.

4 *Immediate availability of the memorandum*

Many groups perceived the immediate availability of the memorandum positively. Two responses evidenced this: "The immediate answers to the assignment are beneficial and very important in order to assess and identify different problems and problematic areas of the topic"; and "The assessment system provides a valuable opportunity for learners not to wait for weeks and weeks before they receive their assignments."

5 *Influence on work and other areas of life*

A few learners referred to the effect of self-assessment on other areas in their lives. The following comment illustrates this: "Self-assessment is a good thing to do because it awakens us in such a way that we get involved in our work practice".

ADDRESSING INTERNAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

Nielsen (1997:299) maintains that there are a few constraints to a module's effectiveness. The assumption is that higher quality would result if these constraints were eliminated or minimised (Nielsen 1997:299). Although these constraints can be internal or external to the programme, this article focuses on how internal constraints have been dealt with in the module. Nielsen (1997:300-302) identifies a number of serious internal constraints. The way in which the module Personnel Management succeeded in eliminating or minimising the following internal constraints is:

Relevance and quality of the learning material. A common complaint about distance education curriculum is that it is out of touch with the learning needs of practitioners (Nielsen 1997:300) as mentioned earlier. The quantitative and qualitative data suggests that

the content of the module and the assignments succeeded in bringing learners in touch with practice.

Effectiveness of learning processes. According to Nielsen (1997:301), the most challenging aspect of providing quality distance education is to provide appropriate practitioner experiences (Nielsen 1997:301). Both the quantitative and qualitative data showed that this constraint was addressed.

Quality of learner assessment systems. Programmes of distance teacher education use a variety of approaches to assessment (Nielsen 1997:301). Unfortunately many systems have been plagued by delays in providing feedback to learners because of the turn-around time on assignments which takes several weeks (Nielsen 1997:302). Using a memorandum on registration and requiring learners to mark their own assignments, could be considered a way to address this problem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE DESIGN

Learning as a continuous process grounded in experience has important implications for educational management. The following are identified:

- (1) Quality assessment recognises the importance of the practitioner's commitment to change (Nouwens & Robinson 1991:109). It includes data-gathering which focuses on improvement. Other strategies which need to be considered in the quality improvement process are (Nouwens & Robinson 1991:109):
 - Adoption of an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach to decision-making and information gathering.
 - Identification and elimination of major weaknesses in the module.
 - Identification of strengths of the module which have been reviewed or are obviously not in need of review to protect them from unnecessary change.
- (2) Acknowledging the perceptions of learners enrolled in 1996 was a considerable risk especially with regard to the self-assessment system in 1998. Since no process is perfect, better ways to improve quality in the assignment and assessment system still have to be determined. The following areas of improvement can be identified:

X The assignment and self-assessment system requires a more detailed justification to learners who need to be convinced that the assignment and self-assessment system lead to value-added learning. Although an attempt was made to do this, some learners require a more thorough explanation. This problem relates to the traditional perception that "teachers do the teaching and marking" (Adams & King 1995:328). At first many learners are unaware that they can be competent assessors of their own work. Due to a lack of experience and uncertainty about their ability, learners may initially have difficulty in accepting this form of assessment. This might entail a paradigm shift for many learners, who previously regarded themselves as "empty vessels" into whom the necessary knowledge and skills were merely poured.

The learning cycle requires feedback to be successful. The quality of learning, however, can be improved if this takes place as soon as possible. The availability of the memorandum in the form of immediate feedback, enforces the notion of a higher

level of learning. Learners need to be convinced that they can and must take responsibility for their own learning (Osterman 1991:214).

· A clear and well-structured memorandum with a detailed marking schedule should be developed to include the diversity of learners and their experiences. Although all activities included a possible answer, practices differ so much that learners may not be able to apply the answer as an appropriate example.

· The findings show that many learners had difficulty in completing the activities within the time limit. Learners should be encouraged to form study groups to help them with the conceptualisation and understanding of the learning material and completion of the activities.

· A system whereby fellow learners mark each other's work or whereby learners indicate the activities in the assignment of which they are unsure, for the attention of the lecturer, may help the learners doubtful of their self-assessment abilities. Since some learners may "ride this system" and thus be made dependant on lecturers once again, they should first mark the activity and leave it for comment by the lecturer. They should be reminded that marking their activities by using the available memorandum enforces learning.

· To help learners plan their learning, future learners will be offered a choice for the submission of a section of the assignment. The assignment will be divided into three sections with subsequent due dates. Learners will have an option of submitting sections of the assignment on these due dates or the whole assignment on another due date later in the year. Learners who feel unsure about their self-assessment abilities can then be "trained" to mark their own assignment.

· Educators should learn to use learners' experience more effectively. In the mastery of learners' environment educators should acknowledge learners' *existing* experiences and *become part* of the environment which both permits and encourages the development of learners (Houser & Vaughan 1995:27).

· Reflection and self-assessment should be more integrated into all activities so that they are not mere add-ons which signal their marginality through self-conscious exercises (Boyd 1993:41).

Conclusion

Educators require more explicit and substantive beliefs of what learning entails, what teaching strategies learners need to use to take advantage of this sort of teaching and how they know learning has occurred. The Learning Paradigm and reflective practice do not answer all the important questions. However, the paradigm sets new questions with new responses (Barr & Tagg 1995:25). Answers to questions such as: What knowledge, skills and attitudes do learners need in order for meaningful life and work?; What must they do to master such knowledge and skills?; Is the module designed to create a learning environment for learners to master such knowledge and skills? And Has the learning experience made the learners flexible and adaptable learners, able to thrive in a knowledge society (Barr & Tagg 1995:25) require attention.

Considering the above questions, the module Personnel Management aims at facilitating the learner's professional development, which includes the facilitation of self-awareness development and the promotion of individual professional accountability. A prerequisite for designing future learning material is to reflect on the learners, the nature of the learning

material, and the methods employed in designing active participation of learners. From the reflection specific strategies can be devised to enhance the experience of learning among the learner population.

The results of the study suggest avenues for further research. Firstly, how can the wealth of knowledge created by each group of learners be made available to future learners? Secondly, what model might be best used to examine the management development of each individual learner? Thirdly, what short term and long term impact does the study of management education offered have on the quality of education?

Bibliography:

- Adams C. & King K. 1995. Towards a framework for student self-assessment. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, November, 32(4):336-343.
- Arcaro J.S. 1995. *Quality in Education. An implementation handbook*. Delray Beach, Florida: St Lucie Press.
- Barr R.B. & Tagg J. 1995. From teaching to learning. A new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change*, November/December, 13-25.
- Bradley L. H. 1993. *Total Quality Management for Schools*. Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Technomic Publishing Company.
- Daugherty A. 1996. Total Quality Education. *Contemporary Education*, Winter, 67(2):83-87.
- Eaton J.S. 1999. Distance education is on your doorstep. *Trusteeship*, January/February, 7(1):23-27.
- Fields J.C. 1993. *Total Quality for schools. A suggestion for American education*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: ASQC Quality Process.
- Goodwin-Davey A. & Davey C. 2000. *Development of learning resources for outcomes-based distance education*. [http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/buo/progressio/22\(1\)2000/mainline](http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/buo/progressio/22(1)2000/mainline).
- Greenwood M.S. & Gaunt H.J. 1994. *Total quality management for schools*. London: Cassell.
- Griffin C. & Kilgore K.L. 1995. Framing the problems of practice. The effect of self-assessment in a study of special education students' internships. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, Winter, 18(1):56-71.
- Hart A.W. 1990. Effective administration through reflective practice. *Education and Urban Society*, February, 22(2):153-169.
- Herman J. J. 1993. *Holistic quality. Managing, restructuring, and empowering schools*. Newbury Park: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Hobson E.H. 1996. Encouraging self-assessment. Writing the active learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Fall, no 67: 45-58.
- Houser N. & Vaughan S. 1995. Meaning in transaction. A socio-psychological reconsideration of teaching and learning. *Curriculum and Teaching*, 10(1):17-28.
- Jedrzejewski D.R. 1995. Putting methods to the madness of evaluating training effectiveness. *Performance and Instruction*, January, 34(1):23.
- Jenkins H. O. 1991. *Getting it right. A handbook for successful school leadership*. Oxford:Blackwell Education.
- Kottkamp R.B. 1990, Means for facilitating reflection. *Education and Urban Society*, February, 22(2):182-203.
- Leder G.C. 1993. Constructivism: Theory for Practice? The case of Mathematics. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 12(1):5-20

- Lee V.S.K. 1996. Quality assurance at the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong. *Open Learning*, February, 11(1):59-64.
- Menmuir J. 1995. Quality assurance in the off-campus delivery of professional development opportunities. *Open Learning*, February, 10(1):43-46.
- Nielsen H.D. 1997. Quality assessment and quality assurance in distance teacher education. *Distance Education*, 18(2):284-317.
- Nouwens F. & Robinson P. 1991. Evaluation and the development of quality learning materials. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 7(2):93-116.
- Nummendam S.G. 1996. Assessment and reflective teaching. *Innovative Higher Education*. Fall, 21(1):39-48.
- Osterman K.F. 1991. Reflective practice. Linking development and school reform. *Planning and changing*. 22(3/4):208-217.
- Prosser M. & Trigwell K. 1990. Student evaluation of teaching and courses. Student strategies as a criterion of validity. *Higher Education*, 20:135-142.
- Purnell K., Cuskelly E. & Danaher P. 1996. Improving distance education for university students. Issues and experiences of students in cities and rural areas. *Journal of Distance Education*, X1(2):75-101.
- Ramsden P. & Dodds A. 1989. *Improving teaching and courses. A guide to evaluation*. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- Rinehart G. 1993. Building a vision for quality education. *Journal of school leadership*, May, 3, 260-268.
- Sherry A.C., Fulford, C.P. & Zhang S. 1998. Assessing distance learners' satisfaction with instruction. A qualitative and a quantitative measure. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 12(3):4-28.
- Schön D.A. 1995. Knowing-in-action. The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change*, November/December: 27-34.
- Swift J.A., Ross J.E. & Omachonu V.K. 1998. *Principles of Total Quality*. 2nd edition. St. Lucie Press: Boca Raton, Florida.
- Steyn G.M. 1997. Reviewing a module in Educational Management, *Progressio*, 19(2):79-104.
- Tanner H. & Jones S. 1994. Using peer and self-assessment to develop modelling skills with students aged 11 to 16. A socio-constructive view. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, December, 27:413-131.
- Van Niekerk D. & Herman N. 1996. Towards excellence in instructional design. A follow-up report. *Progressio*, 18(1):40-54.
- Weller L.D. & McElwee G. 1997. Strategic management of quality. An American and British perspective. *Journal of Research and Development*, Summer, 30(4):201-213.
- Wolcott L.L. 1995. The distance teacher as reflective practitioner. *Educational Technology*, February, 35(1):39-43.
- Wilson J. 1993. Total quality in education. *Journal of Quality and Participation*, January/February 16(1): 62-67.

The international certificate in online education and training (OET) – A best practice model for virtual adult education

Peter J. Weber (Hamburg/ Lüneburg) / Michael Ribold (Lüneburg), Germany

Introduction: The dual structure of OET

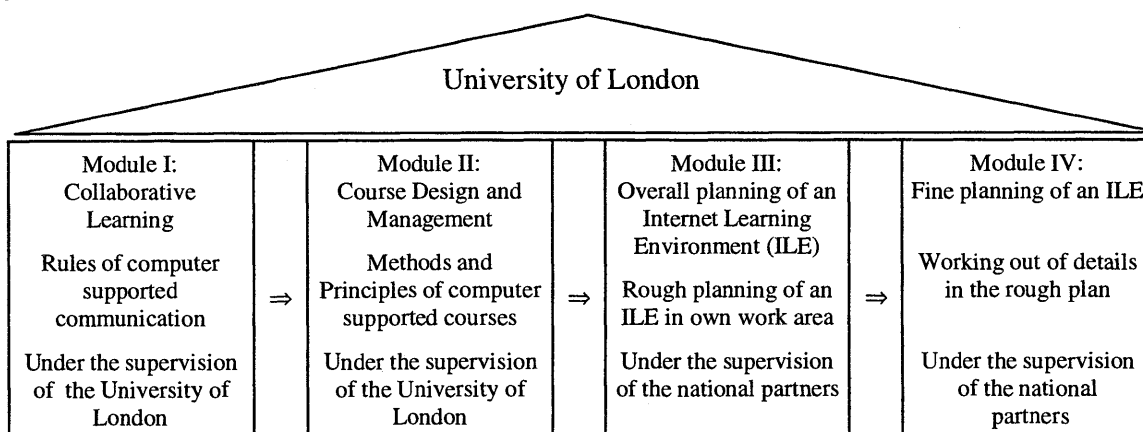
The Course *Certificate in Online Education and Training* is presented jointly by the University of London, the Mailand Bocconi University and the EuroStudyCentre North-West-Germany. The course is open to everyone who wants to begin structuring their educational offer with Internet support. They should also learn how to define their own communicative wishes in the virtual learning space as well as develop an applications concept for the transfer of traditional educational offers to the virtual.

The main objectives of this course include:

- The development of job-related competences in the usage of the Internet
- The combination of traditional criterion of course structure with the construction criterion of telelearning.
- Co-operative project and product oriented teamwork as well as
- Interest-led and self-directed learning

The course is based on a similar course which was offered in England at the University of London from 1993 to 1998 in a purely English version. In its current form, there are two English language modules and two in the respective national language (cf. Fig. 1). The focus of the first two modules is learning to handle telelearning and its Internet supported course design. The third and fourth modules were developed by the Fernstudienzentrum Lüneburg as part of the EuroStudyCentre North-West-Germany and are offered in German. In the foreground here is the personal use of the net in the form of conceptional planning of an Internet supported educational offer. The course can be completed with a certificate issued by the Institute of Education of the University of London.

Fig. 1: Dual structure of OET



The first course in the new form with European partners began in the autumn of 1999 with approximately 50 participants; the second presentation in the autumn of 2000 with

approximately 70 participants. In both presentations, the content division was maintained as two international modules and two national modules.

In the following, the basic dual structure will be presented: first, the conception of the international modules and finally, the national modules. A short summary of the experience with the first presentation of OET will follow.

1. The international modules

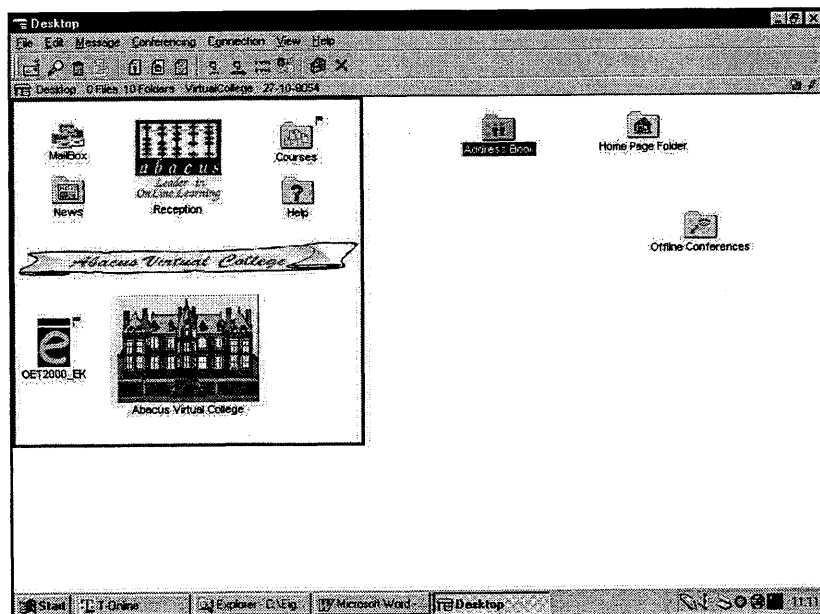
In order to accommodate the needs of participants who came from all over Europe better, the international modules were limited to the first ten weeks, whereas the second ten weeks took place in English, German, Italian and French groups. The final essay about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning (compulsory for the issue of the certificate) was still graded by internal and external assessors of the University of London.

The timeframe for the presentation was hence stretched from mid-November to mid-April, followed by the essay composition. As the participants on average need to calculate approximately 3 hours per week for the course, it can be successfully studied alongside normal work obligations. However, the time needed to realise the conception of the Internet environment depends on individual wishes.

1.1. Objectives

The objectives for the international modules are that through the utilisation of the telelearning tools, the participants themselves learn to make a self-assessment of telelearning. Here you will be given the opportunity to both discuss in groups and try out the possibilities and constraints of computer supported communication as a learning and teaching medium.

Fig. 2: Starting Site of OET



The OET course also places emphasis on the experience of collaborative learning as it is made possible through computer supported communication. In the main, this involves asynchronous communication in groups, like offered in First Class on a user-friendly interface. In Fig. 2 the starting interface of the OET-course in First Class is presented.

The success of the participation in the OET course depends first of all on the communicative activities of the individual participants within the groups. In this way, the fact that it is less about the 'perfect' usage of a specific software than learning about the peculiarities of computer supported communication for various requirements.

In this second point, the OET course clearly differentiates itself from typical distance course models. In traditional, not web-based distance courses, an 'isolated' learner communicates with a tutor or mentor from whom he or she receives 'one-to-one support'. High drop-out rates are associated with this kind of course form as the learner is separated from other learners who follow their own timetables which are not compatible with their own and are usually not compelled to complete the course. In the OET course, the communication between learner and mentor should be enhanced through the focus on the computer supported communication i.e. through e-mail or the conference system in First Class. Crucial is also the collaborative element which presents a qualitative criterion of virtual learning spaces (e.g. Behrens U. 1999).

The objective of the international part of the OET course is that by the end of the course, the participants are able to decide how far a computer supported communication presents a possibility to overcome pedagogic problems in the learning-teaching process through computer supported communication and, of course, that they are able to develop a suitable concept which will then be pursued in the national modules. On the discursive level of the international part, this involves the four elements of: presentation components, teaching-learning components, teaching material components and databank components, for which a suitable virtual conception for the national part will be developed (Weber, P.J./Ribold, M./Reimann, D. 1999).

1.2. Course design

Before the actual course begins, a face-to-face meeting takes place in the institution of the national partner organisations where the partners will be connected through chat-sessions and, if applicable, through video conference. Also those participants who did not take part in the face-to-face meeting; for example, in Lüneburg (the participants in the first presentation came from all over Germany) could still participate in the first group experiences.

The actual course procedure orientates itself around a task-discussion structure. Individual preparation for the activities of the week are effected through work materials which are made available either in print or digitally. These 'weekly' materials are to be differentiated from those basic materials which comprise the course. The mentors attach an 'online task' in the respective First Class file. The answers of each participant form the basis of the discussion which is usually completed through a comment by the mentor. The course design is in this way very simple as participation in the course is both possible without specific software

knowledge at the beginning, as well as being possible from home. This means that the Internet applications using First Class are kept relatively simple.

In addition, an inexpensive way of working with the material is offered via an offline reader. Weekly content topics in the international modules are as follows:

Week 1: Log in and Practice

Week 2/3: Effective Messaging and Course Design

Week 4/5 and 6/7: Course Design Issues

Week 8/9: Structured Online Teaching

Week 10: Introduction to Internet

On the basis of the 'titles' of the first 10 weeks, it becomes apparent already in the international modules that virtual learning spaces are the focal point of discussion. Unlike the national modules, this is not about conceptional constructional aspects in respect to the realisation of participants' own virtual learning space project but is rather about coming to grips in a critical manner with existing concepts (most of which come from the Anglo-Saxon cultural background) in so far as they can be studied from examples. In the national modules which we will now examine, a focussing on conceptional characteristics of virtual learning spaces in the particular language community, as these are dependent on the respective cultures and their inherent learning styles (compare i.e. Markus, A. 2000).

2. The national modules

The partner institutions of the University of London are open regarding the structure of the courses in that they can choose the content themselves as long as they conform to the general framework.

2.1. Objectives

The objectives of the national modules in the presentation 1999/2000 are oriented on the work of the German 'Bund-Länder-Kommission' for Educational Planning and Research Advancement in Germany, who, in an analysis of the meaning of multimedia and new media in higher education assume that:

"the educational market will become de-centralised and globalised to an extent that is hardly imaginable at the present" (BLK 1998, 10).

For this reason, the focus during the conception of this module was also on the consideration of developing a concept for a market-capable Tele-learn product in addition to the typical conceptional features of Internet learning environments in the German-speaking community. During the course, participants should:

- develop conceptionally their own Internet learning environments within pedagogic and management frameworks of their own language and culture
- advance both their independent learning competence and a feeling of community within the virtual space
- learn to use specific learning tools within the teletutoring and
- make synergies from the OET-competence network possible.

At this point, a short explanation of the concept of Internet Learning Environment that was introduced in European academic discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning spaces (Weber 1999) would be useful: an Internet Learning Environment (= ILE) is the result of the formation of a concrete yet open learning situation which can be implemented in addition to face-to-face lessons. Internet learning environments differ from virtual learning spaces particularly in their form which, due to their situational incorporation in traditional teaching remains; for example, as alternative learning sequence within the larger project of tailoring a whole educational offer to an individual or an entire educational institution. This concept is therefore particularly interesting for educational providers who want to put their educational offer either entirely or partially in a virtual learning space.

Within the local modules should be compiled organisational framework guidelines for an Internet Learning Environment offer (marketing conception in the further sense) as well as the conception of an ILE. This should prevent any future offer of an ILE being developed within a market-unfamiliar space. The development of an ILE is therefore a process in which economic and pedagogic negotiation mutually influence one another.

The individual subject matter of the course centres on one hand on a conceptional groundwork through the provision of Internet supported teaching-learning offers and on the other hand, on transferring a marketing concept provision in the area of e-commerce (see, for example, Hanson, W. 2000; Walter, V. 2000) to the continuing education marketing situation. Central points of the ILE-marketing are as follows (Weber, P.J./Reimann, D./Ribold, M. 1999):

- The analysis of the globalised Internet market offers the possibility of evaluating other providers and competitors' products as well as one's own position on the educational market. The maintenance of image and public awareness in the Internet goes hand-in-hand with an overall publicity framework (i.e. through suitable web-sites).
- As a result of the many offers and the resulting queries, a needs analysis must be carried out which enables the offers to be suited to the demand staff recruiting with two aspects in mind: since the added value of the use of Internet depends largely on the co-operation of various partners, competent international co-operation partners have to be found. Secondly, the acquisition of staff with media competence has to be assured (i.e. for tutorial supervision). Regarding the price, conditions and service structures of an Internet Learning Environment, certain requirements of the electronic market have to be taken into account (i.e. the world wide online educational advice or registration for a course).
- Due to the variety and free choice in possible educational offers through the educational providers, strategic advertising in the form of traditional and virtual publicity needs to follow.
- Quality and efficacy analysis have taken on a central role through the loosening of state regulation of educational offers. Since participants on the educational market are also customers (they pay for the education), customer service plays a central role next to participant orientation (i.e. their level of satisfaction).

This conception of the OET courses is aimed at one of the assumed insoluble differences between rational, 'economic action' and 'communicative-oriented pedagogic action' described by German adult education authors. In contrast to the past, future pedagogic action

will be expanded to include the aspect of 'resource-conscious' action which can encourage economic categories to consider above all questions of efficiency. This action should lead to a dissolution of the often too strongly perceived differences.

2.2. Module design

The national modules follow the concept of the international modules in that the learners have to tackle special tasks every week. The fine-tuning of the national modules can be seen in the placement of the tasks (cf. Fig. 3). The starting point for these tasks are usually digital material which is to be worked on in the group. Here, the mentors have the task of being facilitative but not leading the discussion as in a physical seminar room.

Fig. 3: Fine Tuning of Week 11

Activity :	Analysis of the electronic Market
Task 311:	
Read the text regarding the changes in the educational scene to date using the example of higher academic institutions (Initial qualification and life-long learning) from the American perspective and in the discussion, attempt to ascertain the effects of your current educational offer!	
Duderstadt, James T. (1997): "The Future of the University in an Age of Knowledge". In: JALN Volume 1, Issue 2, September 1997, http://www.aln.org/alnweb/journal/issue2/duderstadt.html .	
↓	
Task 312:	
Research programs and offers in the Internet in the area of your current or future educational offer! (i.e. you either offer or plan a course in European educational policy.)	

The activities of the national modules were developed with this background of the communicative approach of the entire OET course. For this reason the primary objective is not for all participants to develop a prototype of an application of a traditional course into a virtual learning space by the end of the course; but rather, to develop such an application with a partner. In the transition from the third to the fourth module, the difference between the planning of a virtual education offer and the pedagogic-technical requirements of such a learning space will be laid down. The optimisation of such an offer should be worked out through discussion with the other participants.

3. Experience with the OET-course

All in all, there was a preponderance of positive experiences with the course by the end of both international presentation. These are rooted primarily in the simplicity of the user interface of First Class which hardly presented any technical 'frustration experiences', as well as the fruitful work through computer supported communication in the individual groups. A further positive aspect to emphasise is that nine of the 12 participants in the German module had a fully developed Internet supported learning space to show after the course on the basis of which the final essay could be written.

The following ILE-projects show clearly the topical as well as the technical spectrum that the mentors had to deal with during the course presentation:

- Project workshop for trainers

- Children living in the web – a challenge for the science lesson
- Environmental management in practice
- Exhibition medium computer
- TeleNet: learning English on the move
- Project planning for communal environmental protection
- Internet-Learning-Environment for client centred discussion leading and talking therapies
- Student counselling

At this juncture, the great transfer potential of the OET course should be pointed out. In this way, three of the Internet learning environment concepts were put into practice with some modifications after the course completion. It was also ascertained in follow-up talks that at least half of the participants could apply their newly learned skills from the course as mentors to virtual educational offers. In one case, a participant actually became a mentor for the second presentation of the OET course in autumn 2000. The achievement potential of the OET course on the First Class platform is founded in the fact that through the communication of the participants, competences come together which are developed through the strength of their achievement in the group project work.

Here a serious disadvantage of First Class comes to light. It concerns the lack of provision of synchronous communication tools which was also criticised by the participants by the end of the international module at the latest. The original English author's own claim to minimise the drop-out rate must therefore be qualified since the asynchronous communication did not always form sufficiently close bond between the participants so that indeed two participants in the German module participated only more or less passively in the course. A further problem also became apparent in that First Class is a simple and heavily text-based virtual learning space and the connecting points on the Internet depend heavily on the work of the respective mentors. In addition, the text-based procedure - especially the lack of hyper-media preparation - is not satisfactory for the participants when they have already acquired experience in web-based learning. Nonetheless, of consideration here is that the course applies above all to novices in web-based learning in order to impart proficiency in producing virtual teaching-learning-offers through a digital distance learning concept – which was indeed achieved.

In order to both increase the sense of belonging in a learning community yet also improve the quality of supervision at the beginning, the international and national modules were staggered and thematic modifications were introduced in the second presentation, solving which solves the typical structure of the course at least within the practical presentation.

Summary

The international Certificate in Online education and training (OET) is in our opinion of a model character for the development of virtual educational offers for two reasons: firstly, it presents a 'best-practice solution' for virtual on-line learning which is a cost-effective solution in order to introduce novices to the basics of Internet supported telelearning. Secondly, it is a prototype for simple but extremely efficient trans-national co-operation between educational institutions in various European countries.

Bibliography

- Marcus, Aaron (2000): Cultural Dimensions and Global Web. User-Interface Design: What? So What? Now What? Internet: http://www.tri.sbc.com/hfweb/marcus/hfweb00_marcus.html.
- Behrens, Ulrike (1999): Teleteaching is easy!? Pädagogisch-psychologische Qualitätskriterien und Methoden der Qualitätskontrolle für Teleteaching-Projekte. Landau (Verlag Empirische Pädagogik).
- Bund-Länder-Kommission für Bildungsplanung und Forschungsförderung (BLK) (1998): Multimedia im Hochschulbereich, Heft 63. Bonn.
- Hanson, Ward (2000): Principles of internet marketing. Cincinnati/ Ohio (South-Western. College Publ.).
- Weber, Peter J. (1999): "Interkulturelles Lernen im Internet – eine Chance für die europäische Integration". In: Marquet, Pascal/Mathey, Stéphanie/Jaillet, Alain/Nissen, Elke (eds./Hrsg.): *Internet-based teaching and learning (IN-TELE) 98 (actes du colloque IN-TELE 98/proceedings of IN-TELE 98/IN-TELE 98 Konferenzbericht)*, Berlin (Peter Lang), 57-64.
- Weber, Peter J./Reimann, Daniela/Ribold, Michael (1999): Certificate in Online Education and Training. Module 3 und 4: Konzeptionelle Planung einer Internetlernumgebung. Kursmaterial, Lüneburg (Fernstudienzentrum).