

The Current Context of Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning: An Introduction

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1. Introduction

This volume of the ASF Series focuses on learner support, all of those activities and services in education that have been developed to help learners meet their learning objectives and gain the knowledge and skills that they need in order to be successful in their courses. Learner support activities include tutoring and teaching; counselling and advising including such services as orientation, learning and study skills assistance, academic advising, and career and personal counselling; and administrative activities such as admission and registration, library and information systems, and infrastructure support for activities such as peer tutoring and alumni organization. In other words, learner support activities are all those interactive processes that are intended to support and facilitate the learning process.

Teaching, tutoring and other forms of learner support exist to serve the mission of the educational provider, and in this sense, are very much contextually bound, reflecting the provider's values and educational philosophy as well as other factors particular to the setting. That being said, there are certain commonalities across most distance education contexts in terms of the role that learner support is intended to play. Teaching and tutoring is generally seen as encompassing a broad range of instructional and coaching activities that help guide students through a course. Learner support is most often used as a term subsuming all interaction between institutional personnel and students (prospective and registered) intended to assist them in meeting their objectives from point of first inquiry through graduation and beyond, often for a lifetime. Teaching and tutoring are recognized as a form of learner support but are often addressed separately in recognition of the centrality of the teaching function to interactions with learners.

In the distance education literature, the term "student support" is used as frequently as "learner support". Hence, in this volume, the term 'student' is recognized as being equivalent to 'learner' in order to simplify usage. However, it is worth noting that the term 'learner' is becoming more commonly used in the literature because it implies a more active instrumental role in the learning process than the word 'student'. Further, the term "learner" is generic, and can be applied to the wide variety of contexts within which learning takes place (e.g. public and private schools and post-secondary institutions, corporate and public employee training settings).

As distance education has evolved from a teacher-centric to a much more learner-centric model, the roles and activities of instructors and other learner support providers have changed to being more proactive than reactive. The nature of learner support in distance education has been affected by research findings that have illuminated the complexities of

the teaching and learning process, learner behaviour, motivation, and factors influencing retention and attrition. These findings have been used to inform and improve practice. A decision by a learner to drop out of a course or a programme is now understood to be dependent upon a wide range of variables, many of which can be influenced by various forms of learner support, in particular, teaching and tutoring. This is important to keep in mind as distance education continues to grow in both scope and complexity so that lessons learned and gains made in one context are applied successfully in others.

New technologies are also having an enormous impact on the way in which learner support is conceptualized and practiced. Through the Internet, learners can instantly be in touch with other learners as well as with a variety of learner support personnel: their instructor, a librarian, a registration clerk, and an academic advisor. Traditionally learner support in distance education has been identified as being a completely different set of activities from those associated with course production. However, with the implementation of online learning, this distinction does not always hold and the line between the two sets of activities has become much more blurred (cf. Thorpe, 2003). An online course may consist of no more than a syllabus and a reading list, with the content being created through interaction between learners and course facilitator. This presents new challenges as well as opportunities for practitioners (cf. Bernath, Kleinschmidt, Walti & Zawacki, 2003).

As a result of demand for access to education and training, and the growing opportunities offered by technologies and the Internet, distance education has rapidly spread to a variety of contexts beyond traditional educational settings. Examples include informal educational projects, for example, those in developing countries that are intended to improve economic or health conditions through the use of home-study materials, corporate and military training that employ web-based or computer-based programming, and individual learning projects that are taken on with the aid of self-help materials offered through computer-based technologies.

New contexts for distance education, and the opportunities for better quality and increased quantity of interaction among and with learners place new demands on learner support practitioners to adapt to new circumstances and develop practices that reflect current views of teaching and learning, address the challenges presented by a particular context, and take advantage of the opportunities offered by new technologies while remaining committed to the values and traditions of social justice upon which learner support in ODL is based. In this volume, we have invited authors from a variety of settings to discuss their approaches to learner support in an attempt to provide both those new to the field and experienced distance educators with a broad view of learner support concepts, practices, and opportunities in open, distance, and online learning today. We start by taking a look at the large picture. The first section of Volume 9 addresses visions and retrospectives, some broad views of the history and future of learner support. In the second section, we turn our attention to a closer examination of practice today by examining different kinds of learner support activities in a variety of contexts, and in the third section, we examine the various aspects of the planning and management of learner support. The final section of Volume 9 consists of three keynote addresses from the 3rd EDEN (European Distance and E-Learning Network) Research Workshop on “Supporting the Learner in Distance Education and E-Learning” held in Oldenburg, Germany from March 4-6, 2004. The DVD which accompanies this book features the original recordings of all of the keynote speeches given at the workshop.

Before providing an overview of the individual chapters of Volume 9, we turn to the challenge of defining terms. Distance education practitioners operate as part of an international community, and it is important that we communicate clearly with one another. Terms such as e-learning, online learning, flexible and distributed learning are frequently used, but not necessarily uniformly and consistently. We have provided some definitions of these terms but recognize that these may vary slightly from author to author even within this volume.

2. Definition of Terms

2.1. Learner Support

As noted above, learner support encompasses all of those interactive activities and services in education intended to support and facilitate the learning process. This includes tutoring and teaching, counselling and advising and related services, and administrative activities in service to learners such as admission and registration. In the context of distance education, learner support has taken on special importance because of the separation between learner and educational provider.

The student support system of the Open University in Great Britain (OUUK), which was founded in 1969, serves as a model for many distance teaching institutions. Alan Tait (1995) of the OUUK, who has written extensively on the topic of learner support, provides the following much quoted definition:

The term student support means the range of activities which complement the mass-produced materials which make up the most well-known elements in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). It is, of course, true that printed course units, television and radio programmes, computer programmes etc., which replace the lecture as a means of delivery, and offer so much both in terms of social and geographical access, and in terms of cost-effectiveness, support students in central ways. But the elements of ODL which are commonly referred to as student support are made up of tutoring, whether face-to-face, by correspondence, telephone or electronically; counselling; the organisation of study centres; interactive teaching through TV and radio, and other activities. These activities have as key conceptual components the notion of supporting the individual learning of the student whether alone or in groups, while in contrast the mass-produced elements are identical for all learners. (p. 232)

Tait's (1995) definition does not refer explicitly to support for students in online learning, because it was intended for use in the context of systems employing print based pre-prepared study materials (*mass-produced material*), which were predominant in the second generation of distance education (cf. Garrison, 1985; Nipper, 1989) and still are on a global level.

Simpson (2002), also from the OUUK, describes student support in the broadest sense, as all measures extending beyond the production of study materials which support students in the learning process. He differentiates between *academic* (or *tutorial*) and *non-academic support* (i.e. administrative-institutional elements).

Academic support consists of: defining the course territory; explaining concepts; exploring the course; feedback - both informal and formal assessment; developing learning skills, such as numeracy and literacy; chasing progress, following up students' progress through the course; enrichment: extending the boundaries of the course and sharing the excitement of learning. (p. 7)

According to Simpson, the first points (defining the course territory and explaining the course) are more embedded in the design of the study materials than the duties of the tutor. Simpson, like Tait, appears to refer more to second generation distance education using pre-prepared materials than to some online learning which relies more heavily on interaction to define content and concepts. (In this volume, Som Naidu makes an interesting case for viewing instructional design as a form of learner support. In online learning, the instructional design may only be apparent at the time of delivery as in traditional face-to-face teaching but is no less important than in pre-prepared material.)

Simpson (2002) uses the term *guidance* for activities of *non-academic support*, which he defines as follows:

Non-academic support consists of: advising: giving information, exploring problems and suggesting directions; assessment: giving feedback to the individual on non-academic aptitudes and skills; action: practical help to promote study; advocacy: making out a case for funding, writing a reference; agitation: promoting changes within the institution to benefit students; administration: organizing student support. (p. 8)

These systems definitions are helpful in defining actual activities within learner support. The functional taxonomy of learner support provided by Tait (2000) is useful in further refining the purpose of these activities:

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 support students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem;
3. systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly. (p. 289)

Thorpe (2003) takes this a step further by addressing the need to re-define learner support in the online environment. Similar to Tait (2000), she takes a functional approach, defining learner support as "...all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (p. 201). With this definition, she acknowledges the interactive nature of learner support as well as the blurring of distinctions between learner support and course production in online learning. Rather than trying to define types of support by staff roles, she notes that learners need support in two contexts. The first is in regard to "... institutional systems (such as knowing what is on offer, how to apply, how to claim a refund, make a payment, choose a course, etc.) before, during and after course study" (p. 203) and the second is in the context of "... the course they are studying, such as how best to complete a particular assignment, how to contact and work with other students on the course, how to make sense of something in the course materials, whether their contributions to the course

conference are relevant, well conceived or otherwise, and so on” (p. 203). She goes on to note that it is in the latter context particularly that “... CMC and the web are challenging our concept of learner support” (p. 203).

Learner support has always included facilitation of learning communities to the extent that this was possible through learning centres, regional networks, and telephone and other technologies. Use of the Internet for teaching and learning has both underlined the importance of this activity, and greatly facilitated it. Learning communities contribute to a learner’s sense of belonging and provide a social support network for learning (affective realm), facilitate acquisition of skills and knowledge through learner to learner contact (cognitive realm), and can help learners negotiate administrative systems (systemic realm).

In the cognitive and affective realm, learner support personnel (e.g. instructional staff, advisors, counsellors) are concerned with activities that are common in any pedagogic practice, that is, advising, supporting, challenging, helping, encouraging, enabling, orienting and skill-building (cf. scaffolding of online learning: McLoughlin, 2002). With the exception of some types of interactions that can be automated such as frequently asked advising questions, these activities are usually carried out by a person or persons (but may be aided by the effective design of any pre-packaged materials, however minimal – cf. Naidu, Chapter 8). The administrative/institutional aspects of support have always had an important pedagogic-didactical dimension, and these activities are also challenged and facilitated by new technologies. The introduction, development, and implementation of online learning requires a significant investment in the macrostructural dimension (cf. Zawacki-Richter, Chapter 4) to facilitate teaching and learning.

Hence, we can define learner support as all activities and elements in education that respond to a known learner or group of learners, and which are designed to assist in the cognitive, affective, and systemic realms of the learning process. The main institutional systems involved in learner support are teaching and tutoring, advising and counselling, and information and administrative.

The term "learner support" (as opposed to student support) was chosen for the title of Volume 9 in recognition that support activities are essential to learning regardless of the learning context (e.g. higher education, corporate training, informal learning), and to underline a view of the learner as central and active in the teaching and learning process.

2.2. Four Basic Forms of Media-based Learning and Teaching

The approach taken to define computer-based learning, online learning, e-learning, and distance education in Volume 9 is to view them as a hierarchy of four basic forms of learning imparted through media. Computer-based learning is a subset of online learning, and each of these is a subset of e-learning. The overarching term for media-based learning and teaching is distance education or distance learning.

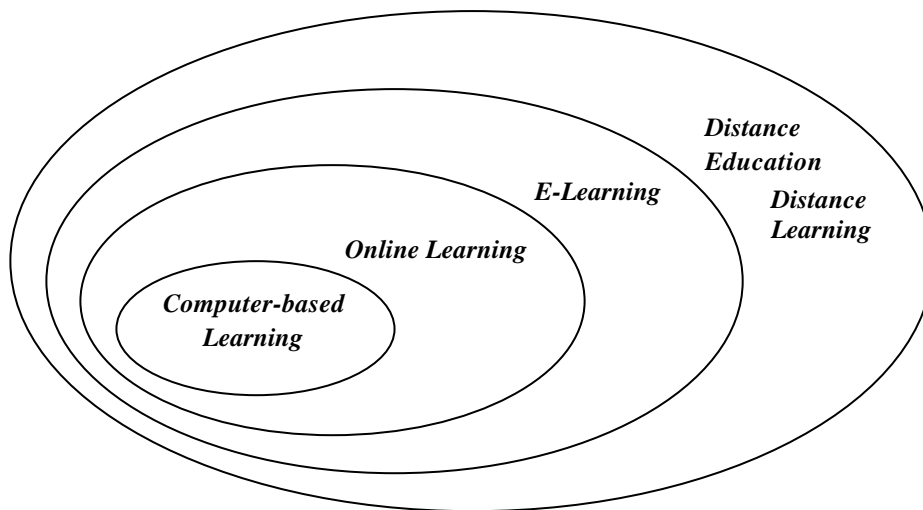


Fig. 1: Subsets of media-based learning and teaching (Zawacki-Richter, 2004, p. 32)

2.3. Distance Education, Distance Learning, Open Learning

Characteristic of distance education is that teachers and learners are separated geographically from one another. Teaching and learning are therefore enabled through media. The central concern of distance teaching pedagogy is how to best bridge the distance:

Because the distance to students was regarded as a deficit, and proximity as desirable and necessary, the first pedagogic approaches specific to distance education aimed immediately at finding ways by which the spatial distance could be bridged, reduced or even eliminated. (Peters, 2001, p. 18).

Online learning provides enormous possibilities for this.

The hypothesis on which this publication is based is that online learning is a subset or category of distance learning that can therefore benefit from the history, approaches, experiences, strategies and attitudes developed and tested at institutions of distance education. This applies in particular to the development of support systems and in general to the promotion of online learning. For this reason the constitutive elements of distance education will be examined in detail.

The origins of distance education go back to correspondence courses (*correspondence study*). With the development of new media, which were also used for distance teaching (e.g. telephone, fax, radio, video, computer, etc.), the term *correspondence study* became too narrow. In North America the terms *independent study* and *home study* were therefore used as competing designations, until *distance education* finally prevailed. This was formalised in 1982 through the change of name of the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE) to the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE), the international association of distance teaching institutions (Holmberg, 1995). Open learning and distance education are often used as synonyms. However, open learning differs from distance education:

... the concept of open learning is different from distance education since it embraces the idea of students being able to take courses or programs without prerequisites and being able to choose to study any subject they wish. Indeed most of the "Open Universities" were founded upon this basic premise. While some distance education programs may involve open learning, most do not. (Moore & Kearsley, 1997, p. 2).

Open learning therefore allows access to study without academic restrictions. Distance education programmes may follow the approach of open learning, that enables as much independence and self-determination as possible. The German FernUniversität in Hagen i.e. is a "distance teaching university" and not an "open university" because students must fulfil university entrance qualifications to earn a degree.

Keegan (1986) differentiates further between *direct education*, by which he means "traditional face-to-face education", and *indirect* or *mediated education*. Distance learning is demarcated from other forms of *indirect education*. These include *programmed learning* or *computer-aided learning* which is one-way communication. Distance learning makes use of *two-way* communication, which enables interaction between learners and a teacher or tutor as well as among learners. The difference lies in the type of communication.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the founding phase of the open universities, distance education was defined by a number of authors (Dohmen, 1967; Holmberg, 1977; Moore, 1973; Peters, 1973; 1994). Using these as a basis, Keegan (1980) proposed a definition which was widely accepted. However, Keegan has repeatedly revised his definition and finally referred to five characteristics of distance education which mutually influence one another:

1. the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education;
2. the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and also in the provision of student support services distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programs;
3. use of technical media - print, audio, video or computer - to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course;
4. provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or initiate dialogue distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education;
5. the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process, so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes. (Keegan, 1986, p. 49)

In the second half of the 1980s there was a lively discussion on the definition of distance education. Rumble (1989) submitted an analysis of the debate and a five-part definition as well:

1. In any distance education process there must be: a teacher; one or more students; a course or curriculum that the teacher is capable of teaching and the student is trying to learn; and a contract, implicit or explicit, between the student and the teacher or the institution employing the teacher, which acknowledges their respective teaching-learning roles.

2. Distance education is a method of education in which the learner is physically separate from the teacher. It may be used on its own, or in conjunction with other forms of education, including face-to-face.
3. In distance education learners are physically separated from the institution that sponsors the instruction.
4. The teaching/learning contract requires that the student be taught, assessed, given guidance and, where appropriate, prepared for examinations that may or may not be conducted by the institution. This must be accomplished by two-way communication. Learning may be undertaken either individually or in groups; in either case it is accomplished in the physical absence of the teacher.
5. Where distance teaching materials are provided to learners, they are often structured in ways that facilitate learning at a distance. (p. 18)

Under the first point there is nothing that would not be expected for every form of teaching and learning and there are no indications of the size of the educational institution. However, self-learning programmes without any contact with a teacher or tutor are excluded. This means that isolated learning with a teach-yourself CD-ROM without any support from a tutor does not fall under distance education (*one-way* communication). Study systems which do not provide any communication between learners and teachers as a body or a group (*two-way* communication) are excluded in the fourth point.

The second point opens up the possibility of distance education being carried out in combination with face-to-face sessions (cf. blended learning below in 2.5). However, learners are basically separated geographically from the teaching institution (thirdly).

While learning in groups was not a constitutive element of distance education for Keegan (1980) ("absence of the learning group"), Rumble (1989) refers expressly to this possibility in his fourth point. The development of computer conferences has assisted the breakthrough of collaborative learning with networked computers.

The wording under point five does not demand the use of prepared study materials which were developed specifically for distance learning. This therefore includes courses in which the focus is on communicative and collaborative processes in Internet-based learning environments and standard textbooks or academic papers form the study material.

Hence, we can define distance learning or distance education as a form of learning and teaching in which technical media are used to bridge the distance between the parties involved in the learning process. The capability of media to afford two-way communication for interaction between learners and teachers and among learners is essential in this process.

2.4. E-Learning, Online Learning, Computer-Based Learning

E-learning generally means learning with electronic media, i.e. via the Internet (Intranet or Extranet), but also via television and radio, audio and video tapes and CD-ROM. E-learning is therefore defined more narrowly than distance learning, in which print-based study materials and correspondence communication are also used. E-learning can therefore be regarded as the same as distance learning, but not vice versa (Rosenberg,

2001). Printed materials which are widespread in distance learning are therefore understood as a form of technology as well. The technologies used for teaching and learning are referred to as *educational technologies*. The focus in Volume 9 is not on the technologies; we refer to works by Bates (1995), Collis (1996), Haddad & Draxler (2002) and Heinich, Molenda, Russell & Smaldino (1998), which deal with technologies in detail.

Isolated learning without a network connection, e.g. studying an interactive CD-ROM (internal interactivity), is referred to as *computer-based learning* or *training* (CBT) or *computer-assisted learning* (CAL). CBT is often based on the approach of programmed instruction. There is no provision for communication between learners and teachers, jointly working on problem-based tasks or projects, or in particular for personal support. While learners are able to determine the time, place and pace of learning, with regard to the contents they are restricted to that provided by the learning programs and the stipulated learning steps.

A solution to the problems encountered in CBT and CAL is providing online learning which enables communication and collaboration via computers linked through the Internet (*web-based learning* or *training*, *WBT*). The advocates of computer-supported cooperative or collaborative learning (CSCL) maintain that the boundaries of computer-supported self-learning programmes can be overcome by including teachers, experts, tutors and other learners (O'Malley, 1994). Online learning is therefore the all encompassing term for learning or training via a computer network, e.g. using the Internet and the World Wide Web.

2.5. Distributed Learning, Flexible Learning, Blended Learning

The extended possibilities for communication and interaction using new media are leading to a convergence of the pedagogic structures of distance learning and campus-based face-to-face learning with regard to support for learners and the practice of teaching and learning (Mills & Tait, 1999; Collis & Moonen, 2001).

Naidu (2003) states that: "The proliferation of information and communications technology (ICT) in conventional campus-based educational settings is clearly blurring the traditional boundaries between distance education and campus-based face-to-face educational practices" (p. 350). An increasing number of universities are offering courses in which phases of face-to-face teaching alternate with guided online study. In this context, terms such as "blended learning" (Sauter & Sauter, 2002), "flexible learning" (Collis & Moonen, 2001) or "distributed learning" (Lea & Nicoll, 2002) are becoming prevalent. A continuum is emerging between the two poles of campus-based and distance learning.

Lea & Nicoll (2002), state that distributed learning is concerned with the following dimensions:

- the fading boundaries between traditional higher education and distance education contexts and the breaking down of distinctions between formal and informal sites of learning,
- the potentials and limitations of new ICTs for learning, especially for social, communicative, and collaborative activities in the learning and teaching process,

- a focus on globalisation, commodification of education, lifelong learning and the spread of English as the global language and main medium in globally offered courses,
- the new literacy demands and expectations on learners and faculty in the light of the "knowledge society" particularly in relation to changing technologies and the opportunities they afford,
- the distribution of knowledge across "communities of practice" and learning in virtual communities.

At many campus-based universities competence centres for e-learning support are being established, institutions which are designated, for example, "Centres for Flexible Learning" (such as at the University of Windsor in Canada which is discussed as a case study in Chapter 3). Some campus-based universities have been very successful in introducing online learning, for example, the University of Pretoria, South Africa's largest residential university (Zawacki, 2002). There, "flexible learning" is defined by Brown (1999) as follows:

Flexible learning is a macro concept and education philosophy that focuses on student centeredness, learning centeredness and flexibility in terms of learning environments and learning opportunities. The international trend is that successful and effective tertiary education is linked to the creation of student-centred flexible learning environments that provide for flexibility in terms of:

- access to and exit from several learning programmes;
- accreditation and portability of qualifications;
- modes in which education takes place;
- modes in which communication and interaction takes place;
- programme compilation;
- study material;
- evaluation and assessment methods;
- time and place of study; and
- pace at which learning takes place.

...[Flexible learning] refers to a mixed or multimode of education that includes all modes of contact and distance education, as well as all possible combinations thereof. (p. 1)

In blended learning, face-to-face and distance learning phases alternate, and different online and offline media are combined.

Distributed learning, flexible learning, blended learning; all these terms describe a new continuum between traditional distance education and contact education in which pedagogical approaches, methods and technologies are used to enable extended and more autonomous, individualised, and self-directed learning opportunities.

3. Overview of the Chapters

Unit One – Visions and Retrospectives.

Roger Mills, in chapter two, addresses the five elements he considers relevant when reflecting the past and looking into the future of ODL. In doing so, he reveals the strong values base that is present in learner support practice. He emphasizes the need to avoid treating distance education only as a business and instead prompts the reader to focus on the learner and to use the available resources in the best possible way for students. He addresses the factors that influence services and how they are delivered as well as issues of quality assurance, and how these are critical to how DE is regarded. ICT should be used carefully and creatively to improve teaching, learning and assessment and the author reminds us that systems must be such that they do not create barriers for students. Mills places his highest priority on reducing the digital divide to avoid social exclusion and promotes the sharing of resources between rich and developing countries.

Jane Brindley and *Ross Paul*, in chapter three, make the case that campus-based universities can learn from DE educators when contemplating issues of learner support and motivation and the changes deemed necessary for campus-based environments. The plan for implementing cultural change on Windsor campus and the challenges dealt with in ODL (attrition rates, isolation, persistence and success, regional support services, changing role of student support, learner needs, educational ethos of the institution) are introduced and tied together. Learner support can help meet institutional strategic, academic and economic objectives, however the authors concede that institutional change presents challenges for the campus-based institution: time implications for faculty workload, resistance to the idea of learner-centered practice, and meeting the needs of changing student populations. The scenario presented is innovative and interesting for any reader who deals with changes at her/his organizational setting and/or is dealing with performance and output issues.

Olaf Zawacki-Richter, in chapter four, argues that learner and faculty support gain increased importance in the online learning environment compared to the traditional campus-based education. This is due to the complexity of development and implementation of online teaching and learning as well as the new skills that must be acquired by all participants to be successful in this new field of pedagogical activity. The author outlines two dimensions of support and goes on to describe the three key challenges that online learning presents that effective learner and faculty support can address. Similarly to Brindley and Paul, he contends that distance teaching universities are in a favorable position to meet these challenges and that many traditional universities will need to tailor support systems to their particular situations.

Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, in chapter five, discusses the challenges for institutions trying to make the transition to new forms of teaching and learning in the digital age. She provides an interesting analysis of the contradictions between the role of the faculty member in industrial forms of education compared to online learning. The assumptions about interaction between students and instructors are quite different depending upon the model employed. In order to take full advantage of the opportunities for interaction offered by ICT, the role of the instructor must change, necessitating institutional commitment and careful planning, financial investment, a rethinking of learner support required, and support for faculty to make the transition. She concludes that the transition

to models of education that make full use of ICT may take longer than originally anticipated, and may not be appropriate for some time in developing countries.

Torstein Rekkedal, in chapter six, provides a comprehensive analysis of the distance education literature that highlights and skilfully weaves together the key principles and elements of learner support into a compelling rationale for building effective support systems into e-learning. The review starts with an examination of definitions, including some helpful critiques of definitions of e-learning, and in doing so, provides a logical argument for the inclusion of student support in e-learning in order to provide a “complete educational experience”. The author focuses on ensuring quality systems for the distribution and presentation of content, two-way and many-way communication, individual and group activities and other personal, academic, technical and administrative support services. The pedagogical issues addressed are: teaching and learning philosophies and theories (independence and autonomy, industrialization, teaching-learning conversation, communication, cooperative learning and constructivism, flexibility, accessibility); student support online and the continuity of concern for students; attrition and completion; reasons for drop-out; and the personal tutor/counsellor. Various frameworks for services (the virtual university reference model, NKI system and others) are outlined thus effectively applying existing theory to modern practice.

Terry Anderson, in chapter seven, challenges some of the traditional values and beliefs about the necessity of human intervention for effective learner support. He discusses the affordances (capabilities) of a networked world and how these can be applied in creating new and expanded student services. He defines learning services and goes on to note that technical capabilities are determined partly by perceptions and values in the minds of users and hence, are not absolute. Having set this context, the author describes the elements he sees as central and how they transform the cognitive, affective and systemic functions of student support services in a networked world, resulting in more cost efficiency and less human intervention by professional staff. Research opportunities and challenges are explored and new types of research models are introduced, which are further explored in Anderson’s keynote address in Unit four of this volume.

Unit Two – Strategies for Learner Success.

Som Naidu, in chapter eight, also challenges traditional notions, proposing that instructional design is a form of learner support. He discusses the use of instructional design techniques to scaffold learning and thus optimize students' learning experiences. Naidu argues that scaffolding is at the heart of effective and efficient learner support and presents five activities (story-centered learning; problem-based learning; critical incident-based learning; design-based learning; role play-based learning) with which this can be achieved. He goes on to stress the importance of context in which the learning and study strategies take place and suggests that supporting student learning needs to be seen as a proactive process rather than a reaction to problems. Given the blurring of distinction between course design/development and course delivery in online learning, Naidu’s chapter is excellent food for thought. Learners and educators will most likely agree with his perspective.

Margaret Johnson, in chapter nine, discusses the study skills learners need when engaging in distance learning. She divides stages of learning development into three categories, and describes the varying methods needed at the different times throughout a learning career. Johnson emphasizes the interest that institutions have in providing an inclusive

and student centred learning environment that contributes to student success. Johnson describes the previous and current approaches to study skills assistance at the OUUK and introduces the reader to their dual mode (paper and web-based) 'toolkits'. She advocates sharing and disseminating good practice in study skills assistance to support the autonomous learner providing resources according to their needs and preferences.

Yoni Ryan, in chapter ten, provides us with the rationale for offering online modes of learner support. She gives us an overview of the frameworks for the development of this approach and focuses on student centered learning, dialogues and interaction. She argues that taking the student lifecycle into account (initial interest, inquiry, academic counseling, study and graduation), and enabling interactions (student-content, student-teacher, student-student and student-learning support specialists) are as important as the form and content of the services offered. She concludes that online student support services can minimize the often argued disadvantages of distance education.

Lisa George and Ilene Frank, in chapter eleven, discuss the increased importance of information literacy, critical thinking skills and librarians' roles in developing these. These services are offered to students and faculty who work at a distance and a number of practical examples that consider resources and modes of instruction are discussed. They note that librarians must market themselves and their services – especially to faculty, who are key in conveying the importance of these resources to their students. Finally, the authors discuss the effect of library-related activities on student performance and conclude that focused library activities can improve retention and academic success in particular courses. Increasingly, library services are considered crucial to learner success, not just for access to resources but for skill development. This chapter considers both of these important roles for the online library.

Ellen Blackmun and Phyllis Pouyat-Thibodeau, in chapter twelve, introduce us to the role of learning communities and the challenges and opportunities they present as part of a student support system. A number of definitions and types of learning communities (virtual learning communities, knowledge building communities, communities of practice, etc.) are presented and the role of communication and interaction in learning and student support are discussed. The authors conclude that learning communities can play a vital role in knowledge base sharing, experiential learning, and social interaction, providing a rich form of support for distance learners.

Christine Walti, in chapter thirteen, introduces portfolios and learning journals as forms of learner support throughout a program of study. She argues that these tools, often used for assessment and/or to demonstrate growth also provide forums that enable students to develop meta-cognitive skills, build self-confidence and encourage students to become independent and self directed learners, all essential to successful distance study. The theoretical underpinnings are discussed and the practical challenges, based on the experiences in the online Master of Distance Education Program (MDE), are explored. Walti presents the rationale for and an example of a tutorial, a further element of support, which guides learners in the development of their portfolios and learning journals.

Barbara Spronk, in chapter fourteen, discusses cultural diversity and its implications for the internationalization and globalization of distance education and learner support. She introduces the reader to the various aspects of diversity and the issues that must be contended with when addressing a global audience. In providing a definition of culture

as a way of experiencing and acting, she sets the foundation for the examination of the "intersections" between culture and learning. She addresses learner cultures (hierarchy, style, orientation, language); academic cultures and disciplinary subcultures; and media cultures, thus allowing for a clear understanding of the issues that are essential for practitioners to consider. A number of good practice examples and strategies that acknowledge and applaud diversity as a means to social justice are provided to conclude this chapter.

Christine von Prümmer, in chapter fifteen, addresses gender issues in open, online and distance learning environments. She draws on previous experience and research in distance education and explores how this can be carried over to new and emerging learning environments. The author familiarizes the reader with gender issues in general and in online education in particular, puts these in relation to the special characteristics of online learning environments and describes how this distinctly affects women. Two approaches to supporting women students are discussed and complemented with examples of good practice. The author concludes by warning against the assumption that better technology means better service and prompts all to consider gender issues when constructing virtual universities by moving beyond prevailing male dominated, androcentric and political decision making processes.

Linda Smith and Kristen Drago, in chapter sixteen, introduce the particular character of and issues in workplace training as compared to other adult education settings. They focus on the goals of workplace training, the profile of the workplace learner and in particular on the challenges and obstacles workplace learners face. The ways in which these needs can be addressed are explored by considering how, when, and where employees work and learn. Concrete examples of various forms and types of support are tied to the ongoing involvement of members in the organization who are responsible for the training programs and for employees. The authors recommend developing a strategic support plan and prioritizing the various support elements by determining the degree to which services and activities can be implemented rather than excluding any particular elements.

Unit Three - Planning and Management of Learner Support.

Chapter seventeen is a reprint of a chapter from *Alan Tait* from the book, *Planning and Management in Distance Education* (Panda, 2003). In it, Tait addresses both human resource and systems management practices in learner support. He starts by identifying some of the major issues that influence management of support services including the commonalities with the service industry, the nature of delivery of service which is often not seen by those in senior management, the relationship between support services and other systems within ODL, and the rapidly changing context within which management in ODL takes places. Tait concludes that effective management is necessary in order to ensure the continued health of the learner support function within institutions but this must be balanced against creating too much bureaucracy which can undermine service to students.

Gilly Salmon, in chapter eighteen, uses the metaphor of "taming the wilderness" when referring to faculty adaptation to new technologies. She familiarizes the reader with the complexities and contradictions that occur with the introduction of ICT in higher education and contemplates the various functions and roles that are being affected in the

different teaching/learning environments. A number of strategies for assisting faculty and the qualities needed to prepare for these changes are discussed. Suggestions for training "e-moderators" are introduced; the need for negotiation of meanings through experience and dialogue and the provision of opportunities to develop and practice skills to ensure success are stressed. Salmon speculates that change in higher education due to ICT will come more slowly than originally anticipated, and concludes that change will be more lasting if systemic change approaches are adopted.

Sue Nalewaja Van Voorhis and *Tina Falkner*, in chapter nineteen, inform us about their experiences of and perspectives on transforming student services to the online mode of delivery. The authors describe the project and process management issues they faced at the University of Minnesota when they decided to automate a large portion of their service and rethink how to use valuable human resources. Concrete and measurable milestones, objectives and outcomes are of as much consequence as guiding questions for the discovery process. They illustrate the significance of adequate resources for both development and maintenance stages and the importance of cross-departmental relationships for success. Issues identified as most likely needing to be addressed are staff retention, recruitment, training, and skills adjustment. This telling case study will interest all readers who are contemplating changing the delivery of their student services.

Thomas Hülsmann, in chapter twenty, looks at cost aspects of supporting learners at a distance and examines how these are affected by ICT. He focuses on efficiency rather than quality and notes that new information and communication technologies are not only having an impact on the traditional separation of course development and student support but costs and cost recovery as well. Means of recovering lost efficiencies are explored in an attempt to deal with the increased pressures that result from increased capabilities of the new applications and the blurring of the lines between course development and new teaching and learning methods.

Mary Thorpe, in chapter twenty-one, examines the reasons why the evaluation of the quality of learner support is important. She does so by discussing the key issues in learner support, defining evaluation and describing methods and approaches used. She argues that the different stages of student support can help target key areas with limited resources. Special attention is given to the impact of electronic media on learner support and the differences this makes for an evaluator. The author then focuses on evaluation as a means of providing persuasive evidence of quality in learner support and concludes that effective evaluation is 'fit for purpose' and entails a variety of strategies and tools, and, when regularly practiced is an indicator of a quality system in itself.

Unit Four – Three Keynote Addresses from the 3rd Research Workshop of the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) on Learner Support, 2004.

The DVD which accompanies this book features the original recordings of all keynote speeches given at the 3rd EDEN Research Workshop, *Supporting the Learner in Distance Education and E-Learning*, held in Oldenburg, Germany from March 4-6, 2004 (Bernath & Szucs, 2004). As well as the three keynote addresses that appear in text version in this volume, the DVD includes Otto Peters on *Visions of Autonomous Learning*; Gilly Salmon on *Islands in the Stream* reflecting on new roles of teachers and tutors and Elsebeth Korsgaard Soerensen on *Developing E-Learning Communities for a Democratic World*:

Building Bridges Through Dialogue and Shared Knowledge Construction. The DVD also encompasses the ‘Welcomes’ and ‘Introductions’ to these keynote speakers and thus provides the possibility to capture the spirit of this workshop in which many of this volume’s authors participated. Readers may want to obtain a copy of the proceedings of the conference

The three keynotes that appear in print in this volume address institutional models and concepts of learner support, history and underlying values that have guided learner support practitioners and the connection between research, theory and practice. Together, these texts provide an excellent overview of the major challenges and approaches to providing effective learner support in the current context of institutional competitiveness, need for balancing scale with connectedness, scarce resources, technological change and opportunity, and an increasingly heterogeneous student population.

Terry Anderson, Professor and Canada Research Chair in Distance Education at Athabasca University addresses the extent to which the practice of student support in open and distance learning is guided by research. He discusses the current challenges related to funding and support for research in e-learning, including an examination of the reasons why educational research is neither valued nor well funded. Anderson provides a strong rationale for conducting research in student support but argues that the current qualitative and quantitative methodological paradigms are unhelpful or do little to directly change or improve practice. Instead he proposes a “design-based” research methodology that is action and interventionist orientated, participant centered and collaborative, and addresses the challenges of undertaking real life research in classroom contexts. A detailed example illustrates this approach and the anticipated advantages of this methodology that uses all research methodologies in a process that follows interventions through from literature and theory research, to multi-mode data collection and the implementation and adoption of studies.

Nicholas Allen, Provost and Chief Academic Officer of the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) presents his institution’s model of online learning, with a focus on how they serve and support their students. He discusses the five key decisions and choices that proved decisive in understanding where the institution currently stands in the world of online learning today. The author then goes on to identify the values that govern the reshaping of the institution as well as the issues that define the way in which services are delivered. He points out that change is continuous and the ability to effectively make transitions is key to institutional survival. The case study that he presents is of particular interest as he reveals that UMUC is poised to change its mission statement and be the open university of the State of Maryland and of the United States with a focus on the educational needs of nontraditional students.

Alan Tait, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at the Open University United Kingdom (OUUK) draws on his long experience as an ODL practitioner and writer in addressing the topic of institutional models and concepts of student support. He reminds of the long traditions and strong values upon which learner support in ODL is based. Using three exemplars of practice Tait sets the historical context of student support within ODL. He then describes OUUK’s history including the technologies employed, the pedagogy, and the social and moral values in which the systems for teaching and learning and student support were and are embedded. The historical overview lets the reader understand the profound changes inherent in the most recent

changes to student support at the OUUK as it adopts a business model that is based on delivery of customer services at a price and to standards that can be defined. The author reflects on the critical issues associated with this model and concludes that the fundamental basis for interaction with students has changed. Relationships are becoming "lite" and he urges the reader to recognize and address the associated tensions.

4. Concluding Thoughts

This volume was initiated primarily as a textbook for those studying the practice of learner support in ODL. However, we think it will be of interest to both those new to ODL and those with greater experience. Most of the authors are well known in the field of ODL and are at the leading edge of practice. Others might not be as well known but were chosen because of recent accomplishments and knowledge of a speciality area. All have made excellent contributions to what we hope is a well rounded volume on an area of practice that is becoming increasingly recognized as crucial to learner persistence and success, both on and off campus. One of the most important aspects of practice is to continually challenge assumptions. We hope that this book will help you to do that, to help you to reflect on your practice, the reasons for setting certain priorities and providing service and interacting with students in particular ways. We also hope you will be encouraged by the exciting and positive transformations that are taking place in this field and at the same time, that you will question whether all developments represent progress. Hence, it seems fitting that we close *Learner Support in Open, Distance, and Online Learning* with the keynote address from Alan Tait that reminds us of the strong values and traditions of social justice upon which learner support in ODL is based. Learner support is aimed toward helping learners succeed, learners that may have been previously disadvantaged by the educational system, or who might not have had the opportunity to participate in education without the existence of ODL. We dedicate this volume to the learners.

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