Pushing the Boundaries
With Online Learner Support

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Abstract

This chapter explores the rationale for using online modes of learner support in distance education, within the student-centered framework of the student lifecycle and the 'dialogues' (Laurillard, 2002) or 'interactions' (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) critical to learning in higher education. At each point in the student journey, institutions have a range of support services they can employ to increase retention and achievement.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an explosion in the use of online technologies as a component of distance education programs, although the percentage of 'wholly online', as distinct from 'online supplemented' courses, is still very low, estimated in the US as 3.2 per cent (Eduventures Report, 2003). The potential of 'learning technologies' to transform distance education, particularly in the developing world (UNESCO, 1998; World Bank, 2002) has rarely lived up to the rhetoric, as various commentators on initiatives such as the African Virtual University (Ryan, 2002; Wolff, 2002; Oketch, 2004) have noted. Notwithstanding over-ambitious ventures, distance education continues to increase in popularity, as 'time-poor' students seek the convenience of off-campus courses, to permit parallel paid work (Cunningham et al., 2000). Distance education enrolments in Australian universities have now increased to over 18 per cent of all enrolments, up from 12 per cent in 1995 (DEST, 2003).

The more egregious failures of online ventures resulted from commercially-driven initiatives hatched before business models for the internet had been devised and stabilized, and with unrealistic 'payback times' e.g. NYOnline, Cardean; or from academics without experience in distance education, convinced that simply providing their 'content' online would produce 'learning' e.g. Western Governors, and Fathom (Ryan & Stedman, 2002); or from technologically-driven 'learner management systems' which were more suitable for administration than for pedagogy.

Had the early designers and managers of online programs heeded the lessons painfully learned over decades of DE theory and practice, much of the attendant disappointment and frustration with online programs - of students, teachers, administrators (Mathews, 2000; Hara & Kling, 1999) - could have been avoided. Early online programs often seemed to exacerbate attrition, with some programs reporting up to 90 per cent drop out (cf. Ryan, 2001). Potter (1998) reports a rate of 75 per cent, in traditional mostly print-based programs at Athabasca University, and refers to a Bates' 1989 study detailing attrition of 25-50 per cent at the OUUK. Belawati (1998) reports 95 per cent attrition for the print and post programs at the Indonesian Open University. Clearly, distance students need high levels of support, not merely well-designed 'content' to succeed.

Distance education research has consistently identified the contributing factors for higher student attrition rates in distance programs than in on-campus education: unrealistic expectations of the program, the time commitment required, and ability; isolation from other students (Li, Lee, & Kember, 2000), lack of administrative support and academic feedback from the institution; and personal circumstances. Some of these, such as illness and family circumstances, are unavoidable, but many are within the province of the institution - at a cost. There is no doubt that measures to increase retention and student success eliminate the cost advantage of print-based distance education reliant on minimal student support, amortization of costs through high volume enrolments, and 'long-life courses' (and cf. Simpson, 2002, for the OUUK cost cutting experience). Further, our knowledge of how best we can support students is often outstripped by our capacity to provide these services, as Rumble (2000) quoting Tait, has observed.

Yet if we as distance educators are to fulfill the promises we make about education as a mechanism for self-realization, we owe it to our societies to provide the best possible support we can, at a cost that is sustainable for our institutions, in ways that do not deny access, and that maximize retention and success, so that our investment in programs brings intellectual and economic benefits for our communities.

Definitions

'Learner support online' essentially involves the provision of those services and support mechanisms that distance educators *know* improve retention and achievement, those services that any successful learning environment provides: adequate information about the program and its outcomes to enable realistic choices by students; robust administrative and technical systems; clear academic expectations and guidance; the provision of adequate learning resources (increasingly in digital forms); and access to counseling and study skills assistance. Where once distance students were 'supported' simply by the provision of learning materials and study guides, and the ministrations of a (more or less) encouraging teacher, education systems, including distance systems, are more cognizant of the importance of total learning environment focused on how students learn. Furthermore, the massification of educational systems has resulted in more complex and differentiated educational environments, with specialist roles (technical staff, librarians) supplementing the autonomous teacher as the sole source of student learning.

Providing services online challenges institutions that have evolved operating systems for on-campus students, in part because they have often made a decision to enter the booming distance education market without regard for the *student life-cycle*. In part, they have ignored the very real advantages of online support services which can overcome the traditional 'disadvantages' of the distance student: the lack of student-student interaction; lack of immediate feedback and contact between student and teacher; slow delivery times for hard copy resources.

For the purposes of this paper, 'learner support services' therefore excludes the actual 'content' or discipline knowledge, but includes those forms of 'learning help' which cannot be provided in conventional print form. It thus includes email advice to the individual or class that emanates from the teacher, as well as the email from a librarian assisting a student to explore digital resources; it includes 'static' information, as well as interactive exercises which are auto-graded, such as are possible in the many multiple

choice question packages available, designed for student self-assessment and immediate feedback on learning achieved.

Many authorities (cf., for example, the comprehensive literature reviews in Cashion & Palmieri, 2002; Peters & Lloyd, 2003) now acknowledge that the most successful distance education programs exploit the benefits of multiple presentation modes, and respond to the preferences of the majority of students for a combination of print, online activities and resources, and communication modes (online asynchronous and telephone synchronous). We need never think that the telephone has been superceded in education (cf. the case study on Western Governor's University in Cunningham et al., (2000).

Frameworks

A coherent and logical framework for the development of learner support online begins with the recognition of 'student-centered learning', i.e. that the learning experience must be designed from the perspective of the student, not from the availability of a particular technology, or from the teacher's (understandable) focus on 'content', or from what suits the institution's systems. Such a framework is best situated within the knowledge of the distance student's lifecycle, from initial interest in distance education as a possible avenue for study, to inquiry at a particular institution, through academic counseling, to study and eventual graduation.

Further, the framework should build on the elements of successful learning environments provided via online technologies that are not possible or are limited in efficacy in print, and that are the 'fault lines' in traditional distance programs. Laurillard (2002) identifies 'dialogue' as the core mechanism of student learning; Moore & Kearsley (1996) prefer the term 'interaction', on three dimensions: student-content (the traditional approach adopted in print-based distance learning, where students are provided with study guides to text resources); student-teacher (traditionally provided by teacher comment on assignments, and more recently by telephone or sometimes summer schools and tutorials, as in the OUUK model); and student-student. The latter has been the biggest inhibiting factor for many students contemplating distance education, notwithstanding the efforts of many institutions that have encouraged voluntary local 'study groups'. Online technologies make student-student interaction not only possible, but a critical part of the construction of knowledge peer-to-peer, following Vygotsky's (1934/1962) social learning theories, and providing the social motivation provided in a group activity.

I would add to Moore & Kearsley's (1996) three 'enabling' interactions a fourth: interaction with learning support specialists. Today's optimal learning environment relies on increasingly specialized learning support staff, including librarians, often the front line for students in gaining vital information literacy skills (cf. chapter by George & Frank in this volume for a discussion of the role of the librarian.); technical staff at 'helpdesks' who troubleshoot the inevitable glitches in online systems; study and language skills specialists, particularly for the larger numbers of distance students of non-English speaking background. In 1999, for example, a full 10 per cent of all Australian university distance enrolments were off-shore international students (Dobson & Sharma, 2001), most with a home language other than English. (Cf. chapter by Johnson in this volume for a discussion of study skills support.)

Institutional systems must allow for these staff, as well as the teacher, to be accessed by students, both via online 'self-service' modules and resources, and directly. Yet current practices seem to reflect a continuing reliance on digital technologies as a delivery mechanism for 'content', notwithstanding expressed student preferences for print as a presentation mode for discursive material. Even the structures of course management, systems such as WebCT, result in an avalanche of email for teachers as they deepen dependence on the teacher as the locus of learner support.

Form and Content of Services

Using the student-centered philosophy, a student lifecycle framework, and the four dimensions of interaction and dialogue, enables an institution to plan and develop an optimal distance learning environment. Following Potter's (1998) schema, a table of services might appear as below.

Table 1: The distance student lifecycle and four forms of interactions

Student lifecycle point	Online Learner Support	Interaction
Possibility of distance learning for a particular student	Advantages / disadvantages	
Credibility / integrity of institution	Authorized agency lists of accredited institutions/programs	
Program information	Complete details of program, including sample materials and assessment	Student–content
'Can I do it?' questions	Checklist – disposition, time commitment, other responsibilities, equipment needed, all fees, expectations	Student–learning support staff / DE specialist
Program decision making	Email advisor and potential teacher (+ Telephone synchronous)	Student–learning support staff/DE specialist; Student-teacher
Enrolment	Forms and submission online, auto-acknowledgement and 'what next' information, e.g passwords, IT regulations.	Student–learning support staff/DE specialist
Payment	Secure credit-card submission (+options for payment)	
Preparation for study	• Equipment and software minimum requirements and instructions • Study skills tips • Information searching / research / literacy skills (on CDROM with links to website) (+ Telephone synchronous)	Student–learning support staff
Technical glitches / coaching	Helpdesk	Student–learning support staff

Study	Website for: • Email questions to teacher • Discussion forum • Bulletin boards (subject-based, program-based and whole-of-institution-based) • Digital resources • Exercises / problem solving • Assignment submission (auto acknowledgement) • FAQ	 Student–teacher Student–student Student–learner support staff Student–content Student–content Student–teacher Student–student
Motivation	Group emails	Student–teacher Student–learner support staff e.g. DE administrators
Assignment results/ feedback	MCQs (auto grading) Accumulated results Website – Group email (generalized feedback; links to online study tips) Online commentary software	Student–content Student–teacher Student–teacher
Revision/exams	Group email; FAQ	Student–teacher Student–student
Re-enrolment reminder / motivation	Group email	Student–teacher; Student–learner support staff
Graduation	Group email: • graduation details • alumni contacts	 Student–learner support staff Student–student

For Potter's (1998) students, administration and learning support were preferred via a 'one-stop-shop', a central telephone and/or online point which could act as an initial 'simple solution' enquiry source for both technical helpdesk queries and administrative information, and a referral center for more specialized services.

'Good Practice Exempla'

There are many excellent examples of how various agencies and institutions have attempted to meet the needs of distance students for learner support online. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL, n. d.), for example, has a toolkit, 'Learner Support in Open and Distance Learning', outlining possibilities for institutional support, though this is not solely focused on online support. Students should also have access to listings of accredited institutions and programs, such as those on the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) website (2003) to ensure they are enrolling with legitimate providers. At the next level, they need detailed course information, including the opinions of previous students, the opportunities provided by the program, and employment prospects. The OUUK site is a good example of information required

at the course level (OUUK, n. d.). Ideally, students should also be able to get reliable and fast information about credits towards courses, such as the automated service provided by the University of Phoenix. Several providers have relatively rudimentary 'can I do it?' type self-assessments which assist students towards a realistic appraisal of their likely success. Institutions *should* provide 'taste-samplers' of courses, so students can experience what is involved. Few do, though Learndirect (n. d. [secure web site]) in the UK offers a range of sample subjects. UMUC, with over 87,000 enrolments has a comprehensive support system, including professional development for teaching staff, perhaps one of the most important elements in finding the correct balance between student-teacher interaction or dialogue, and other forms of interaction, since it is the teacher who can most directly influence student-student learning through assessment practices. (For professional development programs, cf. the Virtual resource site for teaching with technology, UMUC, n. d.).

Orientation to distance learning, study skills and the appropriate software and hardware required for successful study must be provided independently of a website, since many students, like the beginning online student Jay Mathews (2000), who cannot intuitively proceed to an institutional course website, and waits to be told what to do by telephone or mail document. A CDROM, with all Standard Operating Environments for the institution, is the most appropriate form in our experience at Monash University, one of Australia's largest distance providers. UCLA's for-profit continuing education arm, OnlineLearning.net, mandates an online orientation program for new students.

Helpdesks have proved a challenge for most distance providers. Distance students are almost by definition part-time, and 'out-of-hours' learners, so a restricted 'business hours' helpdesk is 'unhelpful'. Macquarie University in Australia and the London School of Economics in the UK have devised an innovative partnership to share a helpdesk, so as to provide 24/7 support across all time zones. USQOnline outsources its helpdesk via internet service provider NextEd, to a number of locations across Asia, to enable 24/7 support (Cunningham et al., 2000).

Digitized library resources have proved the 'easiest' of the technical problems associated with online student support, notwithstanding the high costs to institutions associated with licensing digital journals and digitizing print texts. Access to such resources eliminates the time delays and costs of hard copy postal services, although print costs are then transferred to the student. However, the consequences have been less than helpful, with many librarians bemoaning the 'Google syndrome', whereby students, faced with complex search engines at university libraries, resort to a free online engine. At Monash University (2003) borrowing rates for hard copy materials have declined dramatically, and reference to extended texts has also plummeted. Clearly, online support must encompass academically valid search techniques and information retrieval, accessible online and supported by telephone assistance for student access to discipline databases. (Cf. George & Frank in this volume for further discussion of the role of the library.)

While many institutions routinely dispense academic counseling regarding course choices and study skills, via telephone or email, few have as yet exploited the potential of online personal counseling, partly because of the presumed difficulty of communication in a virtual environment without visual or aural 'cues', and partly because of the privacy issues associated with others' access to digital records. While some protocols have been established through organizations such as Kids Help Line (Brown, 2003), online

counseling is in its infancy within distance education, although some interesting projects have begun, such as that at Open Training and Education Network in New South Wales (Brown, 2003).

Distinct equity groups require specific approaches for success in distance modes. Various disabilities can be accommodated by good website design and accessibility standards outlined and testable at 'Bobby' (Bobby, 2004) while the needs of non-English language speakers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander indigenous populations are catered for in guides such as those provided by the Australian Flexible Learning Network (2004).

I have argued the centrality of student-student communication for retention and study success, and online communication provides this for distance students. Discussion forums, bulletin boards and FAQ pages can be maintained by students, but must be encouraged through demonstrating their value to students, through assessment criteria, and through limited and judicious comments from the teacher. This is the 'highest and best use' application of online learner support: that provided by other students to nurture and construct 'a community of learners' outside the classroom. Equally, as the above table demonstrates, revision tips, examination tips, and 'survival guides' are often best provided student-student, with some supplementary advice from the teacher, and perhaps the distance education administrator. This does not however, replace the institutional and individual teacher online guides.

The Commercial Model

Perhaps the most successful distance and online provider in terms of student numbers and graduation rates is the mammoth University of Phoenix Online (2004) which built on its commercial and graduate success in 'on-campus' education stripped of many of the social, youth-oriented 'support' services offered at traditional institutions, such as clubs, canteens, librarians and computer assistance. UoPOnline has developed a model which relies for economic sustainability on fees which are somewhat higher than those at public institutions, but which are payable per subject, rather than 'up-front'; on standardized centrally-developed curricula, and on class responsibility for other students and whole-of-cohort progression. Yet UoPOnline maintains a low staff-student ratio, of 1:10, far smaller than the distance classes of most other institutions, where high volume provides economies of scale. Although some would argue that the nature of UoPOnline's practical programs, the short duration of courses (five to six weeks), and its liberal credit regime are major attractions, it seems apparent that the provision of student-student contact and convenient frequent access to counselors and administrative staff constitute a large element in its success. UoPOnline (2004) does not publish attrition rates, but claims a 95 per cent satisfaction rating from its graduates.

Conclusion

Distance education providers must exploit wherever possible the multiple support services that can be provided online at the 'fault lines' of traditional distance study: the lack of student-student contact, delays in postal delivery of resources, lengthy delays in teacher feedback on assignments, lack of academic counseling and study skills advice, and library assistance. Adopting Potter's (1998) framework of the student lifecycle to

chart milestones in the distance education experience, they can design information and point to existing resources. Using this paper's four forms of interaction, they can also devise activities, resources, and mechanisms exploiting the potential of online modes to minimize the oft-argued 'disadvantages' of distance education. Given the rapid increase in distance enrollments worldwide, we owe our students nothing less.

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Glossary of Terms

Learner support online: the range of resources and communication tools that act to provide information to, and motivate, students.

Student lifecycle: the time span over which a student initially investigates the possibility of undertaking education via a distance program, through pre-enrolment, enrolment, study and graduation.

Forms of interaction: student interactions with the four elements of the student learning environment: content, teacher, other students, and learning support specialists.