

Evaluating the Quality of Learner Support

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Abstract

Open and distance education systems are highly diverse, but most adopt a familiar division between the construction and use of a package of relatively free-standing materials, and the support of learners before, during and after study. The use of computer mediated communication has rapidly increased with the take up of the World Wide Web, and distance educators are now adapting this technology for learner support as well as for the delivery of resources. Where learning is supported and led through online interaction, the boundary between taught course resources and learner support is breaking down. However, whatever the intensity of ICT usage, the quality of learner support is vital and impacts very directly on the effectiveness of the course in terms of retaining students and enabling them to achieve their learning outcomes. Evaluation has a vital role to play in ensuring that a quality system is in place and delivered, and in enabling a continuing process of improvement of the system, better to support learners as they study. Practitioner evaluators need to draw upon the expertise of specialist evaluators and the literature of methods and research findings in this area. Effective evaluation is evaluation that is 'fit for purpose' and proceeds according to best practice in the field. It is not a single thing but a diversity of strategies, drawing in different ways on the key tools of review, planning, data collection, analysis and reporting. The practice of regular evaluation, with evidence that findings are used and reflected upon, is itself one of the indicators of a quality learner support system.

Introduction

While open and distance education (ODE) systems the world over are extremely diverse, they have often adopted a familiar division between the course package or resources for independent study by the learner, and learner support offered during the process of study itself. These two components in ODE have been a common feature of the literature in our field (Keegan, 1996). Although online teaching and learning is blurring the boundary between these two component sub-systems, and in some cases breaking it down, the process has not gone so far that we can forget about the particular features and issues distinguishing learner support from resources and course materials, and the attendant issues to do with evaluation.

Key authors in the field have defined learner support and together they draw attention to its salient features. Tait (1995, 1996) identifies it with the facilitation of the learning process – learner support being about the support that is provided to individual learners during the process of study of the uniform course resources. Learner support, in contrast to the study resources, should not be uniform, but should be adapted to and responsive to the needs of each learner. Sewart (1993) has emphasised the role of learner support staff, acting as intermediaries between institutions and their bureaucracies, and the needs and approaches of each student, remote from the institution. Thorpe has stressed a function-related definition, and defined learner support as "... all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 108). This definition focuses on the real-time feature of learner support; the fact that it happens during the actual time period that a student studies, and

that the identity of the learner and of learning groups, as well as their location and contexts, is the focus for what learner support is and what it must achieve.

All these definitions provide us with a key to the importance of learner support, and to the reasons why evaluation of the quality of learner support is so important in ODE. The identity of learners – their particular needs and motivations and their progress with the course – these are all at the heart of what learner support is about. Although there are new ways in which virtual learning environments can support the role of the tutor or supporter, it is still the case that person-to-person interaction is at its heart. The quality of a learner support system can impact very positively or negatively on students' learning experience, and either help to sustain the learner in studying the course, or on the contrary, leave the learner isolated and liable to stop studying at the first major hurdle.

Key Issues in Learner Support

Having outlined the vital impact of learner support on the experience of learners, we can already begin to see what issues typically arise and what purposes therefore evaluation is meant to serve.

Having set up a learner support system, we may simply need to know whether it has been delivered. Have our supporters (this term will be used in what follows to cover any of the terms and roles that are in use – tutor, mentor, counsellor, advisor, etc.) for example been appointed in the numbers, areas and with the skills/experience that we intended? Have they fulfilled the terms of their contract and worked with learners as we planned? Have there been any complaints from learners, and have these been investigated? Have supporters had any staff development or briefing, and what back-up has been provided to them? Questions such as these sound obvious, but it is crucial to know the answers to such matters of fact, because we can often assume that what we planned has been carried out and therefore come to mistaken conclusions about the outcomes of provision. We must first be confident that we know what actually happened, before exploring causation and coming to judgements.

The second major area in which we typically need to evaluate, is that of learner behaviour. What did our learners do at key stages in the provision of learning – how did they perform? What proportion contacted the organisation or the supporter, and at what points? Did they submit the assignments or sit the examination, if the learning was assessed? Did they go on to complete the course? Did they attend tutorials or study centres – how many and how often? Did they pass their course and what proportion dropped out? Such questions are key to finding out whether we and our learner support system are succeeding. We will usually want to judge this on the basis of student performance and the success with which they achieve their goals – not all of which will involve assessment but many systems will. Such issues are at the heart of many evaluation activities and the reasons why they are undertaken.

The third major area concerns understanding – getting to the heart of the question 'why' and 'what to do to improve things'. Having observed certain outcomes from our learner support system, we typically notice things that go less well than we anticipate. Let us suppose that fewer than half our registered learners complete the course of study, and that we expected a higher rate of completion. Perhaps our learner supporters are not the

major factor in this, but we will surely want to understand whether changes in this area of our system might help to increase the completion rate.

In addition to evaluating the effectiveness with which learner support has been delivered – the ‘what actually happened’ question – we will probably want to probe more deeply into learner motivations and perceptions, and into how our learner supporters are actually relating to and interacting with learners. We will want to understand who our learners are, why they want to learn, and what they want to do with their learning. In relation to the process of learning, we might need to explore their preferences and constraints. How much time is available for learning? Are there barriers against contacting the supporter, or attending the study centre? Do they have access to the technology we have built into our system – to telephones, radios, computers, video recorders, transport, and so on.

In addition to the many practical issues involved in designing successful learner support, we may also need to understand how people feel, and what are their attitudes and insights about learning. Do they lack confidence in themselves – typically adult learners, particularly returners to learning, very much lack confidence in their abilities (Evans, 1994). Do they find it difficult to contact their supporters? Are their family members putting barriers in the way of their learning or conversely providing the major area of support? Do they feel that they will be able to achieve something once their course has finished? All such issues and many more, may be relevant considerations for the evaluator needing to identify strengths and weaknesses in their learner support system, and areas where improvements need to be made.

Planning and Implementing the Evaluation of Quality in Learner Support

The importance of learner support has been well recognised by leading authors contributing to the field, and methods of evaluating its quality have been set out in a number of key publications. In an earlier publication in this area, a definition and rationale for evaluation that practitioners themselves might undertake was set out (Thorpe, 1993). Evaluation is the collection, analysis and interpretation of evidence about the effects and outcomes of a particular activity or system of provision. It includes both intended and unintended outcomes and should support the making of judgements about the value of what is being evaluated, and how it might be improved.

While many everyday activities include something not unlike this, evaluation has most value when it is informed by good practice in terms of the methods used, and when formal planning and reporting is used. Evaluation should be deliberate and be informed by the literature of professional evaluation and practitioner-oriented research. The results of evaluation should be open to inspection by others, particularly those whose interests they affect, and the permission of those being evaluated should be requested and obtained. It may be important in some circumstances that the findings of an evaluation are published, but even where this is not necessary or feasible, the evaluative evidence should be clarified and reported to users, as the basis for discussion and decision-making.

As mentioned, there are numerous texts in the field of evaluation, and several key texts which the evaluator should consult for guidance on the methods to use (Thorpe, 1993; Calder, 1994; Oliver, 1998). In addition, relevant literature should be reviewed in order to explore what others have found, even in systems different from our own (Murphy,

Walker and Webb, 2001; Simpson, 2002). Such review of the literature, particularly for the non-expert evaluator, is vital:

- It ensures that we learn from experts in areas such as survey design, interview schedules, and methods of reporting
- It provides comparative data against which to judge our own findings
- It suggests concepts and areas for exploration that we might otherwise miss – or pointlessly reinvent

Many novice evaluators for example think first of doing a survey of learners, then following up with some interviews – not realising that a good questionnaire requires detailed knowledge of the situation, gained from qualitative research and observation in advance. Thus it may be vital to do some qualitative research before quantitative surveys, if the evaluators are not already very familiar with the issues. Surveys are key for providing information about the *scale* of particular phenomena, and their importance across a population of learners; they are not the best method for providing evidence about what attitudes and activities are significant and should be surveyed in the first place. It may also be important to follow-up a survey with some in-depth interviews, but it is extremely difficult to design a good questionnaire without a good grasp of what the issues are and how interviewees phrase their concerns and perceive what matters. Once we have a reasonable grasp of these things, we can then design a questionnaire to find out how important they are, to whom, and for what reasons.

Review of the literature can also help us to target limited resources on what are likely to be key areas. For example, evaluation in my own institution provides much evidence of the crucial importance of the early stages of study for keeping students on course and in good shape to complete and pass the course. Distance education shows high rates of drop out by comparison with campus-based study in the UK, where very few students used to drop out, once having achieved their university place. Although this is changing, with the massification of higher education, reducing drop out and retaining students is still seen as one of the keys, if not *the* key characteristic of a quality learner support system. Exploring the reasons why learners drop out, and whether there are particular groups of students at risk, and key moments during which we should target learner support, are priority areas for evaluation, in such a context.

Other researchers have also documented the low levels of confidence that part-time students studying at a distance often experience, and the shock that many experience in the early stages of return to study (Simpson, 2002). There is much evidence therefore that the quality of any learner support system can be judged on how effectively learners are supported during the early stages of study. While this is not the only issue of course, if resources for evaluation are scarce, we will need to prioritise the important areas, and reading the literature, plus small-scale qualitative exploration, are essential preparatory activities, if we are to make the best use of our time.

The Impact of Electronic Media on Learner Support

Where electronic means of communication are integrated into the teaching process, there may be a significant blurring of the boundary between the two sub-systems of distance education. This is not a uniform development, and there are many gradations involved.

However, the ease with which supporters can communicate directly with learners using email and conferencing, impacts on their role. In courses where collaborative learning online is essential, the boundary is beginning to break down between the teaching embodied in the course resources, and the idea of a separate learner support system. This is because supporters and their online communication with groups and individual learners are as much part of the course content and its teaching, as are the resources (Thorpe, 2002). The reason for this is that computer conferencing plus communication via email, enable the online tutor or supporter to provide tuition and support to both individuals and groups, without the barriers of time and place that are experienced in arranging and attending face-to-face meetings or conference calls. It has become possible now to build into the course and even into its assessment, collaborative and group activities that online learners participate in and use in their assignments. Learners themselves are also communicating online with each other, and can provide very significant support and encouragement. (Cf. the chapter by Blackmun and Pouyat-Thibodeau in this volume for a discussion of learning communities). This is leading designers of courses to build-in learner activities and discussion online such that these become as much part of 'the course resources' as the provision of the resources themselves. In courses which are designed this way, and which incorporate successful online collaboration, the work of the supporter can also be embedded into the assessment system.

As already mentioned, not all courses using computer-mediated communication will adopt such a highly process-oriented approach, and there are still models which build the course resources first and define the tutor or learner support role as complementary to the course resources, which provide the totality of what is to be learned. However, even in this case, where CMC is simply used as an additional medium for interaction, tagged on to the traditional model, we are seeing the evolution of new models of tutoring or learner support and runaway demands by learners for previously unheard-of response times from tutors. Some learners may expect a response to an email query within hours, let alone days, and the scale of this demand is proving unmanageable, where supporters are essentially working part-time and to rates of pay which assume tightly defined roles and hours of work.

There are three major differences for the evaluator in the context where learner support is delivered using computer-mediated communication. First, if permission is gained in advance, it is possible to archive and to analyse all interactions that take place online. While we may not want to undertake this literally – we might be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of data – it does give us the opportunity to sample particular periods of interaction, or particular representative groups, whose work we can monitor and analyse.

Second, we can use electronic communication itself for data collection. Instead of face-to-face or telephone interviews, we can use email communication to ask open-ended questions of students, or even use chat for discussion of issues, with groups and with individuals. It also becomes much more possible to sample activity and opinion regularly throughout the duration of learning. The main risk here is the probability that we overdo the collection of data and leave too little time for analysis, reflection and careful reporting. This is a typical mistake in evaluation, particularly where practitioners undertake the work. Their tendency is to focus too much on data collection, and to find themselves overwhelmed with the key tasks of analysing and making use of the data, once they have been collected.

Third, the speed with which changes can be made to a course and to the role of the learner supporter, can be very much quicker than in print and non-computer-based forms of communication. Online course materials can be updated much more quickly, and communication between the central organisation and each networked learner supporter is much more rapid. The potential therefore to respond to the findings from evaluation is in theory at least, greater and more rapid.

Evaluation for the Purposes of Providing Persuasive Evidence of Quality in Learner Support

There is not space here to discuss in detail the many different kinds of evaluation that are required for different contexts and purposes, though that can be pursued through the literature referred to. What should be emphasised here however, if our purpose is to have robust evidence about the quality of learner support, is that one-off efforts of evaluation are unlikely to be enough. Two kinds of information that an evaluation system is likely to need, particularly if quality is the focus, have been distinguished. The figure below refers to these as components of evaluation.

First we must have regular and reliable information on how our learner support system performs, not just in one instance, but month after month and presumably, year upon year. A quality system is not one which produces good results in one year, then fails in the next two years.

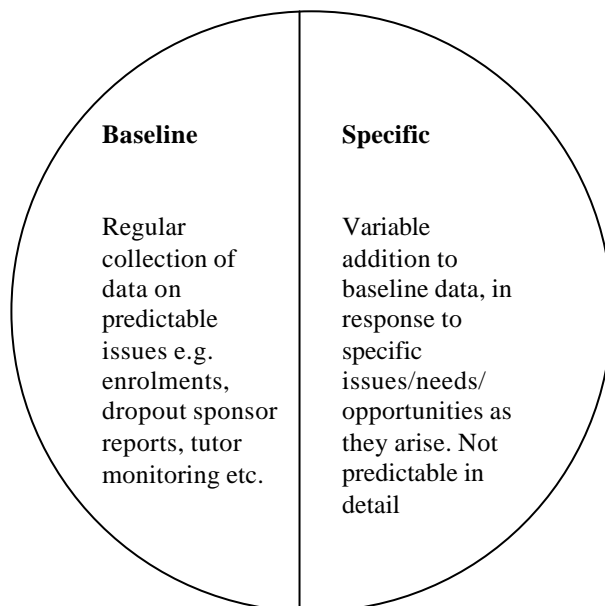


Figure 1: Two essential components of evaluation to support a quality system

What we need is evidence about performance on a regular basis – baseline data which is regularly collected and provides robust evidence about predictable issues, such as size of learner groups, characteristics of learners and supporters, attendance and contact frequency, reasons for study, retention and course completion etc. This is the kind of data we need to collect regularly and compare, year on year, so that we can see patterns and changes, which themselves could indicate a need for follow-up or further study.

Such evaluation will often reveal the need for a specific study to follow up problems identified by baseline evaluation. Or it may be that there is a new requirement for provision of different courses or learning opportunities. In these circumstances, we need to set up an issue-specific evaluation – designed to provide additional and new evidence in relation to a new issue or to throw more light upon poor performance or difficulties as these arise. For example, we may introduce a new activity for our learner support system and wish to evaluate its impact. This requires an evaluation designed specifically for that purpose, and one we may not do more than once – depending on the issue of course.

Conclusion

Effective evaluation is evaluation that is ‘fit for purpose’ and proceeds according to best practice in the field. It is not a single thing, but a diversity of strategies, drawing in different ways on the key tools of review, planning, data collection, analysis and reporting. It can be undertaken for a host of reasons and be owned by different actors in the learning support system – learner supporters themselves can evaluate their own practice for example. However, if it aspires to provide evidence of the quality of the system of learner support as a whole, careful planning, user consultation, professional advice and experience, and long-term commitment to finance the costs involved, will be required. Indeed, the practice of regular evaluation, with evidence that findings are used and reflected upon, is itself one of the indicators of a quality learner support system.

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