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Measuring quality in learner services: building towards the future

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OVERVIEW

Quality in open and distance learning - how do we define it and how do we know when we have achieved it? While there is much written about evaluation in education, there is little evidence that systematic evaluation methodologies are regularly employed by educational practitioners. This paper addresses the neglected task of evaluation of learner services in open distance learning (ODL). Consideration is given to the rationale and theoretical framework for these services, the importance of context in determining their role and the application of existing evaluation strategies to the ODL student services context. For the purpose of this paper, learner services are defined broadly as any generic psychoeducational or discipline-based human interventions by the provider such as tutoring, counselling, provision of information, and academic advising.

Most of the welcome new writing about needs to 'critical reflection' in distance education (cf. Evans and Nation, 1989, 1992) focuses on the design of learning materials, the use of technologies, and the tutoring or instructional function. Very little research attention has been given to other types of interventions with learners (provision of information, orientation, advising, counselling, library and administrative services), and the role that these services might play in a developmental or constructive model of learning.

THE ROLE OF LEARNER SERVICES

One of the difficulties inherent in discussing evaluation of learner services is that the types of services under consideration are so varied, and by their very nature, are contextually bound. Whether services are offered at a distance or face to face, by a private or publicly funded institution, for children or adults, they exist to 'support the academic mission of the school' (Lyons, 1990). Interpreted broadly, this purpose opens the door to a wide variety of possibilities for learner services, particularly in looking at the role they can play in helping an institution or agency transform its academic mission to become more responsive to its learners and its changing environment. In this sense it is not possible to readily define learner services

as a universal set of interactions with learners. Rather, learner services are defined by context and purpose.

This premise has obvious implications for evaluation. Presumably any intervention with learners is developed in response to a perceived need for that service. An important purpose of service evaluation is to provide information about whether objectives of a particular intervention are being met. Hence, in addressing the topic of evaluation, it seems important to begin with a discussion of the historical rationale and developing role for learner services in ODL.

The development of comprehensive learners services in ODL is a fairly recent endeavour. Most early distance education schemes were concerned much more with access and availability of learning opportunities than with the individual experience of the learner. Consequently, distance education has been typified by high enrolments and high rates of attrition (Keegan, 1983). Student support services for distance learners were first developed as a defensive response to the high percentage of casualties produced by the mass education model which characterised distance education. Early forms student support were usually course content based. The tutor became the human interface between the learner and the course package. Instructional support helped to personalise and humanise an essentially industrial model of education, the main feature of which was the mass production of instructional materials which could be efficiently disseminated to large numbers of students. As open and distance learning systems became a more common way for people to gain access to formal education, concern about learner success and interest in how it might be promoted grew.

In Canada, the concern about lack of student persistence was manifested in the development of a wide variety of student support services in distance teaching institutions. These services, designed to help students prepare for and cope with the special demands of distance education, included orientation and information, advising and counselling, instructional support (tutoring/teaching), and student advocacy (McInnis-Rankin and Brindley, 1986).

While concern about student attrition provided a reason for the development of learner services, it did not necessarily change the core values which determined the way in which institutions conceived and operated the educational process. Learner services have frequently been seen as student retention strategies added on to an already complete mode] of education. Consequently, in Canada and elsewhere, when institutions have looked for cost savings, the first and deepest cuts have often been made to learner services (Paul, 1988). All too often, it appears that services such as tutoring, advising, and counselling have not been seen as an integral part of the core business in open distance institutions. Unfortunately, there have been few service evaluation data to help practitioners to demonstrate the usefulness of learner services to institutional goals. Although learner services had been added to learning packages in order to increase retention rates, there was not a great deal of evidence to show that this purpose had been fulfilled.

At the same time that there has been a trend in many institutions to cut learners services or institute fees for them, there has been growing recognition of the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the industrial model for distance education (Evans and Nation, 1989; Sewart, 1993; Tait, 1988, and in press). Sweet (1993), in a comprehensive synthesis of

literature, discusses the centrality of learner services in making ODL more responsive to changing environments; also the strong trend toward developmental and constructivist approaches in learning and teaching. Sweet's analysis thoughtfully considers the evidence for a changing view of the learner as more instrumental and active in the learning process, and makes a strong case for changes in the development and delivery of instruction and other learner services to accommodate a constructivist view of learning.

The shift in ODL from an expository teaching model to a more experiential constructivist one calls for a change from a defensive piecemeal approach of responding to learner deficits to a more proactive and holistic one of attending to and enhancing the learner's experience. This is an important consideration in the current competitive environment of ODL which demands flexibility and speed of response from providers. Sewart (1993) discusses the marketplace advantages of the move from viewing distance learning as an industrial endeavour to a service endeavour, and stresses the role of learner support in making this shift. A number of ODL institutions have already moved from more inflexible models of print-based package learning to more responsive entrepreneurial models which provide for rapid and effective response to the needs of the learner. Before learner services are dismantled under pressure from scarcity of resources and demand for course production, it may be advisable to reconsider their value to the institution.

PRINCIPLES OF EVALUATION

Most often, evaluation of educational programmes has been concerned with measurable outcomes based on the distance of individuals from predetermined norms or standards. However, more complex conceptions of learning are challenging evaluators to reconsider methods for evaluating the experience of the learner and the outcomes of the learning process. At a time when our conception of ODL is changing rapidly, how do we define goals, norms, and standards for service provision, and what methodologies are most appropriate to evaluate whether these are being met?

The answer to the question, like the services to be evaluated, is bound by its context. Consequently, it seems less important to discuss the appropriateness of specific standards or methodologies than to identify principles of evaluation which can be applied to any setting. Practitioners interested in building their services on a solid base of evaluation data might start with a series of questions:

- What is the approach to education and what values are inherent in this approach? Quality can be measured by the extent to which we live up to our stated goals and values. Values, more than any other factor, will determine what kind of measures will be seen as meaningful in any context. If quality is defined as becoming more responsive to learners, then it is important to be clear about what this means. For example, if the individual nature of learning is valued, the appropriateness of universal norms and universal application of services or interventions needs to be considered. If the development of the learner is valued, quality cannot be measured strictly by outcomes ' such as completion rates. Rather, we must struggle to define the process of becoming an independent and collaborative learner, and then work towards finding ways to enhance and measure this process.

- Are the services offered based on existing research? If the services take account of existing research on student behaviour and interventions, the evaluation task will be clearer and there can be continuity and direction in service development. As Thorpe (1988) points out, evaluation can play an innovative role in ODL development by providing a structured program of trying out different models and systems. Current knowledge about student behaviour can be used to guide practice, including the development of norms and standards of service provision. Too often, 'expert opinion' (as opposed to validated research data) influences decisions about service offerings.
- Are services and service evaluation clearly linked to a theoretical framework? Whether stated or not, underlying every model of, learner services is an assumption about the goals of education and how the particular services offered support these goals. However, practice is not often explicitly based on theory, and even when it is, evaluation may not consistently test the theoretical rationale. A well-defined epistemology for learner services can be developed from the existing research base, and systematically tested and refined through the evaluation process.
- Are the objectives of each service explicit? Although learner services are assumed in some way to enhance the learner's experience, the expected outcomes of a service are rarely made clear in specific terms. Clearly stated objectives for each service offered will make the evaluation task clearer (although not necessarily easier).
- What is the purpose of the evaluation? The type of information needed should determine the sorts of evaluation measures required. General measures of customer satisfaction are always important, but may not testify to the effectiveness of a service in meeting certain goals, provide information about how a service needs to be revised, or be helpful in making resource allocation decisions.
- Can the evaluation methods adequately evaluate the goals and objectives of the services offered? The current view of learning is more complex than in the past and requires more complex evaluation methods. When learning was seen as passive acquisition of knowledge and skills, it was easy to define education evaluation as measurement of distance of the learner from norms and standards. If the view of learning is one where learners actively reconstruct their existing knowledge to come to a more complex understanding, then evaluation of learner services must be concerned with whether and how service interventions contribute to this goal. Evaluation methods need to be both qualitative and quantitative, concerned with individuals as well as groups, and measuring both intermediate and final outcomes of a complex process.
- What are the opportunities for and constraints to evaluation? Evaluation methods will be determined in part by feasibility - the resources available including time, funds, technology, and staff expertise. Another consideration in choice of methodology is the audience for the evaluation data. In some cases, it may be more important to collect detailed data about learners' experiences, and in others, broader empirically-based data may be desirable.

A LONG-TERM APPROACH

Part of the reason for the lack of evaluation research is that, as for counselling in other settings, the culture of learner services in ODL is not amenable to evaluation. In a recent national study in Canada, Conger, Hiebert, and Hong-Farrell (1994) concluded that career and employment counselling 'is not systematically evaluated - and usually not evaluated at all'. Learner services in ODL is a broad field with no well-defined disciplinary base, and is often characterised at the local level by low status positions, scarce resources, and staff with heavy workloads created by immediate service demands. Staff who work within institutional settings providing services to learners are rarely faculty, often have little formal research expertise and are usually not rewarded for conducting research.

It is easy under pressure of scarce resources and heavy demands for service to focus on short-term goals, and to forget evaluation. However, in order to build the type of research and evaluation program being advocated, it is necessary to take a long-term view. On the positive side, there are important benefits to initiating and maintaining systematic evaluation of services, and over time these benefits will contribute to the development of a culture more conducive to continuous evaluation at the practitioner level. Practitioners who regularly evaluate the services which they offer are able to demonstrate their contribution to institutional goals. For example, helping students to develop new learning strategies may contribute to increased retention rates and to better performance in courses.

Evaluation can contribute a great deal to effective decision-making about learner services: which to offer, which to drop, which students to target, identification of unmet needs, what kinds of staff competencies and resources are required, and how to have the most impact on meeting institutional goals. Continuous evaluation allows practitioners to be able to articulate clearly the role which learner services play in ODL, to take satisfaction in providing a constantly improving and valued service, and to continue to develop a theoretical framework for learner services in ODL. Most importantly, it helps practitioners to keep the larger picture in sight through continually challenging the assumptions, beliefs and values upon which their work is based.

Note

Portions of this paper are from a book chapter by the author entitled Learners and Learner Services: The Key to the Future in Open Distance Learner, in Keough, E., and Robertson, J. (eds.), *Distance Open Learning: Emerging Issues. Illustrations and Analysis*, Toronto, Trifolium Books Inc.

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