Rethinking Learner Support: the challenge of collaborative online learning

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ABSTRACT   *The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as an integral part of the design of distance taught courses raises interesting challenges to our thinking about course design and learner support. These have typically been conceptualised as two complementary but distinct systems in distance education, characterised by different practices often carried out by different groups of staff. Where CMC is designed as an integral part of the course, with collaborative learning as essential to assessment and study, this separation breaks down. The design of online activities is integral to both learner support and the course content, with new possibilities for open and distance learning as a result. Where the learning group itself is a resource for study and personal development, it also becomes feasible to orientate courses and programmes towards local teams and communities. Online tutors play a key role and need to develop 'the technology of conversation' and expertise in the design of activities, as part of their facilitator role.*

Posing the Question

Open and distance learning (ODL) is characterised by a more diverse range of practices than ever before. Some of the traditional print and correspondence models are still viable and in use, while we have also developed the most advanced online environments to complement the more interactive technologies of CD-ROM and the Web. ODL feels like a radically different experience for those practitioners who can look back from the most advanced technologies of today, to review what we were doing 20 or so years ago (Cochrane, 2000).

The purpose of this article however is to review the implications for how we conceptualise learner support of online-intensive and interactive forms of learning and teaching. The focus therefore is on courses where students have electronic access to resources and where they are expected to be in regular contact online with their peers and tutor(s). The key feature will be that they work in a virtual learning environment, which begins and ends with online interaction. Collaborative forms of learning where these are achieved provide a particularly demanding context for both tutors and learners and one which challenges our conventional models of learner support.

In a context such as this, the substance and meaning of online activities is determined by the particular students who work together online. Their tutor may play a very direct role also, helping shape these interactions, sometimes designing

the activities themselves in order to suit particular needs of the current group. There may be little if any fixed body of content common to all learners. The OU's Masters in Open and Distance Education is one such programme, and includes courses with a much smaller proportion than usual of course material prepared by the course team. Since students may also surf the Net to find articles that fit their interests, it is not even clear that there *is* a defined body of material which creates a shared framework for all students.

This raises the question of where the boundaries now lie between learner support and course design and development. As an author of postgraduate course material for students of open and distance learning (Thorpe, 1999), I find this an interesting dilemma. Traditionally, learner support is seen as that which happens *after* the course materials have been made. Its function is usually defined as enabling learners to study successfully and to develop their own understandings of the material. As Tait (2000) defines it, the common assumption is that student support is 'the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups *which complement the course materials* or learning resources that are uniform for all learners, and which are often perceived as the major offering of institutions using ODL'.

Such boundaries however no longer hold in online courses where collaborative learning plays a major role. If much of the content of such a course is generated through online interaction and collaborative activities, how can we consider course design without also dealing with learner support at the same time? And where does one locate online interaction—within course design or learner support? Where so much of the content of the course cannot be specified in advance because it is the process and substance that takes place in the online interactions, course design and learner support start to merge. Furthermore, since learner support is no longer an add-on to a predefined course, but itself defines what the course becomes, the old model of course design first, learner support second, should be questioned and possibly reversed. Only when we have decided what can be delivered through online interaction will we be in a position to design 'content' and create course materials.

Learner Support as a Technical Term in Open and Distance Learning

Learner support has developed as a technical term for a particular set of practices, which have been developed within ODL, and it is with this technical meaning that I am concerned here. The everyday meaning of 'support', particularly the idea that all aspects of ODL should facilitate learning and the learner's well-being, is still relevant but not my primary concern here. We can assert that *all* aspects of an institution's provision, from the enquiry desk through to the quality of the interface on the CD-ROM, should be supportive in the sense of fostering high quality learning. However, distance education practitioners have developed the term 'learner support' to identify a distinctive and important set of practices carried out at a different time and often (though not necessarily) by a different group of people from those producing the course materials—up until, that is, the use of online and collaborative learning.

'Learner support' is not a term that has much currency within campus-based

higher education. In that context, it often refers to provision that must be made for handling personal difficulties which grow too great for the student to handle alone. Such provision is oriented to *exceptional* needs arising for a minority of students, although there has also been a growth in services such as careers guidance and study skills that are relevant to the student body as a whole. Learner support in ODL refers to the meeting of needs that *all* learners have because they are central to high quality learning—guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills, access to group learning in seminars and tutorials, and so on. These are the elements in systems of learner support that many practitioners see as essential for effective provision of ODL (Keegan, 1996; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

However, important though many of those writing in this field believe it to be, Sewart (1993) notes that a review of key areas of the literature back to 1978 did not reveal any comprehensive analysis of learner support services (see also Robinson, 1995). It is therefore particularly challenging to address the issue of learner support in online learning. Can we just 'add on' the Web and CMC as a new medium through which support is provided, or do we need to reconceptualise learner support?

In what follows I shall occasionally use Nipper's terminology of 'second generation' and 'third generation' to indicate large-scale shifts in the way we teach at a distance brought about by the use of the Web and CMC (Nipper, 1989). However, this should not be used to oversimplify such technology applications and their effects. Third generation ODL will not necessarily be collaborative and constructivist (Garrison, 1997; Jonassen *et al.*, 1995) just by virtue of the use of these technologies. The social interaction and virtual presence that can be delivered, require the integration of both pedagogy and technology and practical commitment to collaboration in learning. Whether or not third generation ODL *is* collaborative and constructivist, will depend on how the technology is used.

Meanings of Learner Support

ODL Sub-systems with Distinctive Roles—learner support individualising, humanising

Keegan (1996) identifies two distinct sub-systems within distance education: course development and student or learner support services, which he characterises as 'the essential feedback mechanisms that are characteristic of education', distinguishing it from the publishing house or materials producer (p. 156).

Tait has expanded this emphasis on learner support as the key means through which uniform course materials are articulated with the interests of diverse groups of students, as individuals and as learning groups (Tait, 1995). He sees this role as complementary to that of the materials, and he has also drawn attention to the humanistic tradition embodied in systems which provide for interpersonal interaction, identifying conversation and community as values which should not be lost in technicist approaches to system or learning management (Tait, 1996). Research into the experiences of individual learners has stressed how important this dimen-

sion of enjoyment and relationship can be, in fostering personal transformation (Lunneborg, 1994, 1997).

Institutional Intermediaries

Sewart defines learner support as the means through which individuals are enabled to make use of institutionalised provision. Learner supporters are 'intermediaries', able to talk the language of the student/learner and to interpret the materials and procedures of complex bureaucratic organisations (Sewart, 1993). While course production might work within a management model appropriate to manufacturing industry, he likens learner support to a service industry, in which the needs of customers are paramount. Learner support activities are produced and consumed simultaneously, a process in which the learner/consumer must participate actively, as well as the tutor/supporter (p. 7).

Interpersonal Response

Thorpe has focused less on system implications and more on how to construct a definition which will locate the *functional essence* of what distinguishes learner support from other elements in the system (Thorpe, 1994, 1999). Learner support is defined as *all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process.* Course materials prepared in advance of study, however learner-centred and interactive they may be, cannot respond to a known learner. Even interactive programmes which react to input from the learner cannot make a response to the particular learner Jane Brown or Adam Smith, in the light of knowing Jane or Adam or their study group, as particular people studying here and now.

This is an important distinction, at a time when computer-based programs are being developed with 'tutor' and similar terms in the title, although they cannot respond to a known learner or group of learners (Albert & Thomas, 2000). They offer automated supports or frameworks that structure online learning and reduce the load on human tutor or other support staff. They may therefore play an important role within a course or the support system loosely termed, but they are not as yet fully responsive to particular people and their actions as they learn.

The Key Function and Elements in Learner Support

If we can no longer assume that there will be two distinct sub-systems with contrasting roles, does this imply that we no longer need a concept of learner support? In practical terms we have certainly found that online learners continue to need support. The difficulty comes where we try to conceptualise this in terms of two sub-systems or of a complementary addition to course materials, neither of which really fits where courses are taught through a collaborative online process.

However, this is where a functional rather than a systems-related definition is particularly helpful. If learner support is defined as 'all those elements capable of

responding to a known learner or group of learners, before during and after the learning process' (as outlined above), no assumptions are made about the nature of the course or the sub-systems and structure of the provision in question. This definition also brings together elements that are a common feature of other definitions and uses of the term, and provides an effective starting point. Instead of relating learner support to types of system, it relates it to its key function of response and responsiveness, in relation to three essential and inter-related elements— *identity, interaction and time/duration.*

Identity is crucial because it indicates that a learner support system must include the possibility of responding to and interacting with a person or group known to the learner supporter. Note that relating to the individual may or may not be central here. Individualisation is not essential on those programmes where the key learning 'unit' is the group. Learner support therefore should not be tied only to efforts which support individual learners, albeit that for many systems, response to individual learners is a key capacity in learner support and one of its most exploited features. However, the important point is that the learner supporter knows that the enquirer or learner is a person with an identity that influences their response. Such information about identity as exists may be slight—perhaps not much more than gender and date of registration, but even that can make a material and significant difference to the content and style of interactions for the purpose of learner support. It does also signify that learner support is essentially to do with interpersonal interaction— until such time as we have machines in use that can be conscious of human identity in the way described here.

This reveals of course how culturally specific learner support is and therefore how important it is to be alert to cultural differences between learners and their supporters, as well as across the learner population itself. Online learning that crosses cultural and national boundaries will need to be especially sensitive to these issues. All learner support also needs to be sensitive to the way in which identities change in parallel often with progress through a course or programme of study. Support needs to be modulated not only in relation to the person but to the stage they are at and the changes they have experienced.

Time and duration are therefore already foregrounded in focusing on identity. But they are also essential in the sense that learner support is about a 'live' process which has duration—it is the process experienced by individuals and groups, from the point of considering study, choosing whether or not to study, through studying and then ending study or progressing further. By contrast, course design is about planning for something to happen—the designer may be very active in creating the course but 'the course', or more properly the course material, is an object without duration until the moment it is taught or studied. Learner support is a process defined by the duration of actions performed by actual and potential learners, which in turn are affected by the actions of their supporters, whether planned and intended or not. Learner support is in that sense therefore a dynamic process, in which the impact of interventions is never wholly predictable. Not only must the supporter respond or act within a particular time frame, but their response will also influence what happens in future and the speed of the response. This will be so even where

learner support occurs asynchronously, because it will still be by definition within the real time of that learner or learner group's study activity.

Interaction, specifically interpersonal interaction, is key to all main theories of learner support because it is the only way of addressing the needs of learners *in the terms in which those learners wish to express themselves*. The distinctive capacity of people is that they can respond whatever the input, providing they understand the language used. An 'interactive' CD-ROM, for example, allows inputs from the learner but within a tight prespecified framework and with a response based on a limited set of predicted inputs. By contrast, a tutor can respond appropriately virtually whatever input a student makes, and can develop a dialogue out from that input, addressing specifically whatever it is that concerns that particular person or group of people. Interpersonal interaction thus is part of the functional essence in that it represents the most flexible and open-ended form of interaction we can deliver.

There are two contexts within which the interactive process of learner support happens: the institutional context and the course or teaching context. The availability at times of need arising within both contexts is crucial to provision of effective support. Learners need support with regard to their operation within both:

(a) 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, and

(b) 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. It is in this area particularly that CMC and the Web are challenging our concept of learner support.

Learner support is essentially about roles, structures and environments, and therefore: support roles and supportive people, together with support structures and supportive environments. Online teaching and learning is generating new forms of support and challenging our existing view of ODL systems. Where learner support is available on demand at any time, from the learner's perspective, such services are probably a more continuous and available feature of ODL than any other.

The Impact of Online Teaching

So what is the impact of online teaching on both the institutional context and the course study context for learner support? I will comment briefly on the institutional context and then focus on the course study context.

Institutional Context

The speed with which consumers can now expect to use insurance, banking, investment and sales services via the Internet has pushed those with large student

populations to put course information and registration services (at minimum) onto the Internet too. Large-scale single mode institutions can use online communications to deliver information and advisory services, for a time duplicating existing print and telephone media but ultimately perhaps replacing them altogether (Phillips *et al.*, 1998). Electronic communication has been used to provide another medium for support rather than changing its nature. However, applicants and learners who have Internet access can also find new sources of support in the form of fellow learners and alumni. Questions about what courses are 'really like' can be answered by ex-learners, who represent an enormous resource for information sharing and informal social contact. In the institutional context therefore, delivery of online learner support is changing the form of many interactions, increasing the frequency of learner to learner and learner to institution contact, but not necessarily challenging the traditional concept of learner support itself.

The Course Study Context

Turning to course delivery and teaching, there is currently a mixed economy for many institutions, in terms not only of whether CMC and the Web are used but how essential they are for the achievement of learned outcomes (Moran & Myringer, 1999). There is a range of evolutionary forms of learner support in this context and it is helpful to think of this in terms of a continuum of practice. I have mapped out what might be expected at opposite ends of the continuum, starting with the least integrated model, where CMC is essentially added on to a second generation DE model.

CMC Added on

At this end of the continuum we can expect to see the continuation of well established approaches where CMC is used as an additional medium for interaction, but the process of study is still largely defined by prepared course materials and the 'external' authority of the course team. Tutors may need to be content experts as well as facilitators, but learning will be driven by the design of course materials created in advance. The institution will be able to offer on- as well as offline methods of support for all those stages of involvement and decision making that individuals go through whenever they take accredited courses offered by a publicly recognised institution.

In this context, the impact of electronic communications will be evolutionary not revolutionary. There is still a body of course material prepared in advance, and the role of learner supporters is therefore the familiar one of mediation between the learner and academic authority, facilitation of active learning approaches, and scaffolding of the learning process. What differs is *how* these roles are achieved and while some tutors will be able to reach the same level of success in the online environment as in telephone, correspondence and face to face, others may not. Online support via email and conference interactions requires, for example, a high degree of skill in modulating tone and phrasing to match both situation and participants.

Such skills have to be developed and used self-consciously and sensitively. Not all tutors are comfortable with this, and many are probably unaware of the skills they already use in order to achieve a conventional tutoring role through the more familiar media of telephone and face to face interaction. For some, online tutoring feels like a wholly new and unfamiliar world. Others perceive it as an extension of their existing skills, which they feel able to adapt and develop.

Opening up electronic access to learner support has also revealed runaway demand by learners for response from tutors and course teams. Even if the demand is only from a minority, such minorities can represent hundreds of students per course and an exponential increase in the email and conferencing load on faculty members. The costs of meeting this demand are prohibitive and in that sense the impact of the technology is being constrained by what is both affordable and reasonable. The management of expectations has become a crucial issue not only because of the costs, but also in terms of the finite resources of time of key members of staff, whose personal space can readily be overwhelmed by the freedom learners now have to contact them electronically.

Integrated, Wholly Online Teaching

Courses at this end of the spectrum will have been designed from the beginning in order to take advantage of the interactive potential of online learning. In this context, the online tutor represents a new kind of animal in ODL. Let us suppose here a model where the tutors of the course carry authority to create the detailed course teaching as it progresses over the duration of the course, rather in the way a conventional university lecturer might decide how they were to teach introductory history, working within the broad parameters of what their department had decided that 'introductory history' should be. Such tutors must of course be content experts, but they will also need even more skills of learning facilitation than the conventional tutor of a second generation distance education course.

In the case of this and other similar courses, the traditional model of learner support does not hold. Learner support will not be about complementing a pre-existing and self-contained set of materials designed for individual study. There may be some course materials prepared in advance, but probably fewer than the conventional course, and if existing resources on the Web are used, these will come with virtually none of the structure that we would expect to be built in to a second generation distance education course. It is the purpose of the online interaction *to use the learners themselves as a resource*, and to build on their experience, reading and perspectives.

This is the design of teaching being used in online masters courses such as those taught at the OUUK. In the case of courses in the OU Masters in Open and Distance Education, for example, a relatively small volume of text-based resources has been designed in advance to launch each section of the course and to provide 'bearings' to guide a programme of online interaction and much less structured reading. The major focus for student learning is the programme of activities, which their group tackles online, in conferences facilitated by their tutor and increasingly

by the group themselves. Stimulation of a critical grasp of knowledge, and deep processing of the meanings of both resources and practice in ODL, are fostered by continuous assessment and by the online discussions in tutor groups. These number about a dozen students to each tutor/facilitator, who is contracted to spend several hours every week in online interaction and support of various kinds. Staff/student ratios at the OUUK are more usually one tutor to 20/25 students on average, with much lower hours for interaction with students expected of the role.

The pedagogical design of these courses builds on a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Learners and tutor work together intensively on personal meaning construction in which learners seek to integrate their own experience with resources provided by the course team or teaching institution. In the case of the OU MA in Open and Distance Education, a strongly collaborative approach has been built onto this approach, emphasising the values of peer facilitation and mutual support through construction of an online learning community. In this context not only do students get to know each other online very quickly and in some depth, but groups can take on a different character and quite different experiences can be had depending on which group a student happens to be in. A student also has the choice of how they present themselves, and can to some extent manipulate the kind of personality they present through their words and actions. Studying together will certainly bring their identities into play, possibly more intensively than even face to face study opportunities typically allow.

Such a model is now a familiar idea and rallying ground in the literature of ODL. It is in fact easier to conjure up the ideal model of collaborative and conversational learning as a construct than as lived reality. It takes considerable ingenuity, design and appropriate educational goals in order to achieve a course where interaction online is *absolutely essential in order to pass*, rather than a highly desirable enrichment. Nonetheless, it is often celebrated in terms which draw attention to its ideal features, by contrast with those of large-scale 'industrialised' forms of distance education. Garrison and Anderson, for example, contrast the two in terms of 'big and little distance education', in an article which extols the values of LDE (little distance education) for the elitist research universities (Garrison & Anderson, 1999).

While the contrast may be overdrawn, online teaching which does not include the highly designed course materials of second generation courses, but which *does* aim for the intensive online constructivist model of learning, is a radical change. There is a challenge to the basic assumption of two sub-systems, the one coming after the other and being primarily concerned with learning facilitation not with course production. A fixed body of knowledge has not been created 'out there' for both tutor and learner to relate to. Who and what is 'in authority' may be less clear, and the relationship between learners and supporters similarly more fluid and open.

Second Generation DE and Online, Collaborative Learning Compared

To draw the contrast clearer we might envision the second generation model of learner support (Fig. 1) as a three-way traffic round the 'triangle' of course materials, tutor and learner, with the learning group an occasional 'event' on the

Course materials   **Learner group**
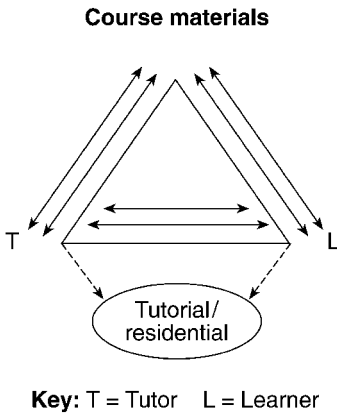

Key: T = Tutor   L = Learner

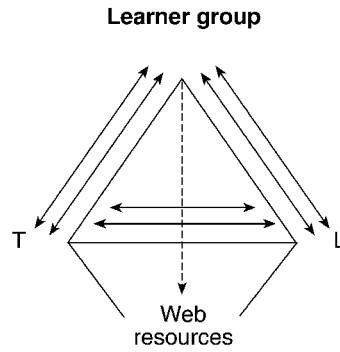Fig. 1. Second generation ODL: learner support model.

Fig. 2. Online and collaborative ODL: learner support model.

side, for those students who choose to take up the option for a tutorial, face to face or otherwise. The lines of communication between both tutor and student are quite heavily used, showing the overt interaction that is possible in a second generation ODL system with developed learner support enabling the individualisation of learning, counter-balancing the course materials. The model can also include intensive 'interaction' between the learner and the course materials, if they are designed for learner engagement and include many activities and approaches designed to encourage an active learning process.Online teaching by contrast (Fig. 2) must include a fourth point of orientation, since the learning group itself creates such a focus of attention and study time (Burge, 1995). This constitutes a largely new source of ongoing interaction. Indeed the group process *is* the course to a great extent, and although resources are provided, their authority is deliberately lower than that of the conventional course, and the requirement on students to construct their own knowledge structures takes priority. *The availability of learners to each other and to the tutor asynchronously as well as synchronously has the potential to overturn the emphasis on distance education as an individualised form of learning. The potential to create extensive dialogues and interchange electronically means that online teaching is often prioritising the learning group as the chief resource for learners and the focus for the tutor, rather than the needs of each individual learner, though these too can be accommodated if the pedagogical design supports that.*

Implications for Learner Support and ODL Systems

Drawing together the impact of the changes discussed above reveals a number of themes.

Creation of Online or 'Virtual' Learning Environments

The software interface and the design of websites and conferencing architecture are

new and powerful tools that institutions can use to shape the learning 'space' and influence learner use. Some of the earliest critics recognised the need to create an online culture which replaces the face to face and other cultures in which we feel confident about speaking and contributing. Feenberg's account of the loss of all the usual cues of gesture, tone and indexicality of face to face communication is telling (Feenberg, 1989). Lacking these cues and scripts for interaction in familiar settings, misunderstandings and communication breakdown are an ever-present threat. Communication anxieties and identity management become issues for most contributors. Feenberg aptly comments: 'playing at computer conferencing consists in making moves that keep others playing. The goal is to prolong the game and avoid making the last move' (Feenberg, 1989, p. 27). Mason (1994) has observed the persistence of reluctant minorities, who seem unwilling or unable to overcome the barriers and contribute effectively. Jones and Cawood (1998) document how students can and do subvert the purposes of online courses, and use existing methods of communication to make short cuts in achieving the ostensible goals of the online context.

Feenberg also refers to Goffman's term 'absorption' to account for the pleasure to be found when a group works well, each member sharing the purpose of the interaction and committing themselves to a community, albeit one established on a temporary basis. He and others have emphasised the need for participants to experience intrinsic rewards from participation, without which interaction may be spasmodic and ineffectual. Stratfold has summarised the essential features of conferencing systems designed to foster rewarding interaction (Stratfold, 1998).

Increased Importance of Learner Support as a Delivery Mechanism

In the online teaching context, the quality of the learning experience is heavily dependent on the resources the group bring to bear and on the skill and commitment of their online tutor (Musselbrook *et al.*, 2000; Salmon, 2000). Where these both work well, the technology and social interaction truly enable the 'defeat of distance'. The content experts or course team can 'speak' directly to learners and if necessary become tutors themselves, thus teaching at a distance without the need for intermediaries in the form of tutors or other learner supporters.

However, teaching online, particularly fostering collaboration and a constructivist approach, requires novel skills and attitudes for many educators. Skills required for the online teaching role are being defined by several authors (see particularly Salmon, 2000). Indeed particular systems may benefit from setting up several specialist roles, to manage different aspects (Tolley, 2000). A definitive account of learner support at this stage is not feasible, given the new possibilities opening up for video and audio communication. If global teaching and websites designed for cross cultural participation increase as anticipated (Mason, 1998), awareness of a wide range of cultural norms and expectations in the educational context will also be needed. These will certainly require sensitivity to and accommodation of a variety of communication styles and preferences for formality (Collis & Remmers, 1997).

A Wider Range of Learning Outcomes

The use of interactive technologies is also increasing the range of learning outcomes achievable through learner support. Collaborative learning and IT skills development are new dimensions in ODL, made feasible by CMC in ways which neither tutorials nor residential options could deliver. In courses which use the full potential of the Web and CMC, interactivity between learners is set up as the medium through which many key course learning goals are to be achieved (Macdonald & Mason, 1998; Weller, 2000). A large element of the course is in effect what would be called 'learner support' under second generation terminology. While the term now sits rather awkwardly with the activity of online teaching, many practitioners emphasise the enlarged importance of the quality of interactions set up and sustained during course presentation.

The New Group and Community Potential of Distance Education

The concerns of particular communities can now be addressed through bringing local groups together and negotiating learning programmes. This is an enrichment of the traditional 'independent learning' orientation of ODL, and an enlargement of its value, in so far as individuals can work now within effective groups on a continuing basis, as well as realise their own individual learning needs and preferences (Garrison, 1997).

New Skills and Capabilities for Learner Supporters/Learning Facilitators

We can be assured that there will be no single model of online learner support. We can anticipate that a variety of roles and titles will continue to develop, incorporating the range of local needs for support to the communication and discursive requirements of particular courses and learning groups. Currently we are learning new ways of creating social presence through textual and audio-visual communication, and how to design for supportive synchronous and asynchronous interaction and collaboration online. Global teaching, and increased use of virtual presence through video and voice communication will bring new challenges and new combinations of content expertise and process expertise, to suit local needs.

Systemic Changes within the Institution as a Whole

As Moore and Kearsley (1996) emphasise, such far reaching change in one area of a system brings change elsewhere. Learners can now interact online for all registration and administration functions, with online advice and support available in parallel with course-based support. There are also changes within the large-scale capital-intensive institutions where the front-end loading of course production is changing. Lower initial production costs are feasible but costs during presentation are likely to increase, to sustain the IT infrastructure and realise the benefits of continual updating and learner support online.

Conclusion

In sum, 'learner support' is the arena within which transformations in the nature and the scale of activities made feasible by online teaching, are generating widespread change in pedagogies and learning communities, and across institutions as a whole in ODL. These are clearly manifest in both large- and small-scale variants of ODL, and we are seeing the evolution of existing second generation approaches as well as the introduction of completely new online forms. The connotations of 'support' can foster misleading and unfortunate imagery—the crutch, leaning post or parental guide, for example. Whereas our best online tutors are developing what Romiszowski (1997) has described as 'the technology of conversation' and our researchers are identifying the skills we require to develop as expert 'knowledge workers' (Eisenstadt & Vincent, 1998).

Recent debates within this journal have focused on the potential of the new interactive capacities of computer-based media to create a new phase in the development of ODE. Sumner (2000) provides an important reminder that engagement in these developments should be subject to critique and challenge about their wider purpose and social impact. She uses Habermas's distinction between the life world and the system world to point up the tight link between corporate global initiatives and use of computer-based technologies for learning systems development, including promotion of distance learning systems specifically. Undoubtedly, third generation distance education shares with all preceding technology applications, the need to be harnessed and shaped to serve desirable values and goals. We cannot assume that such goals will be delivered automatically, merely by the use of particular technologies.

However, the issue remains of how we might characterise what counts as a desirable goal or value set for distance education to deliver. I share Evans and Nations' unease (Evans & Nation, 2001) with Sumner's stark dichotomy between life world (good) and system world (bad), favouring the (perhaps more conventional) goal of critique, engagement and valuation of the learning community, as the enduring goals and values we should support. Whether or not distance education of any generation has espoused such goals and values can only be ascertained through analysis in some detail of what has been delivered, and the quality of the learning process created. In such matters, the devil really is in the detail and not in the large sweep of the claims that daily accompany the latest Internet offerings.

But while technologies themselves do not guarantee progressive education, they do provide certain affordances (Laurillard, 1993). The communicative dynamics that can be created through intensive design and build of online learning groups do afford the possibility of greater communication—and greater challenge—for both learners and tutors/course creators. Learners can and do challenge the pedagogical assumptions as well as the knowledge claims of those in authority within such learning contexts. Naturally the challenge can extend to the values that as educators we are currently assigning to collaborative learning. Distance learners in some contexts have identified reduced freedom to study at their own pace and place, as a result of online collaborative approaches being used in their courses (Thorpe, 1998).

Their right to surface both dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction, around this and other issues, and to engage their course tutors and the teaching institution in discussion of the choices available to them, is one of the more desirable potential outcomes of online communication. What matters is less how we line up with regard to our priorities and preferences, and more that we are open and willing ourselves to engage in the process-intensive and time-consuming online debate with both learners and colleagues. In the light of that assertion, collaborative teaching and learning support online offers distance educators an additional and a powerful means of achieving desirable educational goals.

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