E-xperience in E-learning: The Impact of a Peer Assisted Online Mentoring Scheme on an E-learning Programme: A Case Study of E-College Wales

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ABSTRACT

An independent evaluation of E-College Wales was carried out in spring 2003, to assess and consider the vision of e-learning within the University of Glamorgan from the viewpoint of students and staff. One of the main findings from this evaluation was the need for an enhanced support framework that satisfied the needs of the student. Many students articulated the need for a mentoring system, designed to support first year students. This research paper will therefore evaluate the implementation of a peer assisted online mentoring scheme (PAL – Online), highlighting a gap in the current literature concerning student support in relation to e-learning and establishes a need for further investigation into how mentoring schemes such as PAL – Online can enhance the e-learning experience for both student and teacher**.**

Keywords
E-learning, Mentoring, PAL-Online, Experience

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet has spread to a point where it has become acknowledged as the dominant commercial and social force (Sloman, 2001) - but what does this mean for today's e-students and e-moderators? It could be argued that in spite of technological advances, there are still limits to technology's ability to respond to individual learning demands that has influenced the nature of the Internet and taken electronic relationships, including mentoring, into uncharted territory (Laurillard, 1993, Hamilton & Scandura 2003). This research paper will therefore consider the role of peer assisted student support within an e-learning programme, explaining the rationale behind introducing PAL – Online (Peer Assisted Learning – Online) an online mentoring scheme, into E-College Wales and finally evaluate the impact of this scheme on the participating students.

BACKGROUND

It must be recognised that one of the most common models to explain the learning process comprises three simple elements – student + teaching materials + student support = successful student (Simpson, 2002). He argues that student support is generally seen as encompassing tuition and a miscellany of activities with names like counselling, guidance and advice, and points out that support falls into two broad areas. The first is academic (or tutorial) support, which deals with supporting students with the intellectual and knowledge issues of specific courses. The second area is non-academic or counselling support – the encouragement of students in the affective and organisational aspects of their studies. Simpson (2002) emphasises that only a few of the activities involve working directly with the student and much student support activity may not necessarily occur directly at the student/ teacher point of contact, thus demonstrating the opportunity to embrace student support within an e-learning environment. It is also possible to include a mentor in this relationship and use the nature of this e-learning environment to harbour the benefits and overcome many of the barriers that exist online.

A mentor has been defined as an experienced, successful and knowledgeable professional who willingly accepts the responsibility of facilitating professional growth and support of a colleague, (Hutto et al. 1991). A person who possesses outstanding knowledge, skills and expertise in a particular domain and who facilitates a direct individual approach that provides information and assistance (Sinclair, 2003). Mentors are also expected to be

committed and address the individual needs of the student or protégé whilst providing guidance and provide feedback regarding mentee development and progress (Fairbanks et al., 2000 & Stanulis & Russell, 2000). Apart from support, the position of the mentor can also be perceived as that of role model - aiming to inspire and demonstrate good practice; where the mentor displays characteristics such as: acculturator - helping the student get used to the relevant culture; sponsor - opening doors and introducing the student to the right people and resources; and educator - to encourage reflection and to give the opportunity to provide feed back (Sharpe et al. 1998). But what does a mentor actually do? The literature conjures up some quite extraordinary definitions that are inappropriate and likely to confuse creating ambiguity for both students and potential mentors.

The definition and role of the mentors involved in PAL-Online bears more of a resemblance to the origins of the word Mentor, who in Greek mythology guided and advised the young Telemachus through his formative years (Hawkridge, 2003), than these modern day stipulations. PAL-Online's principle 'reason for being' is to help the students of ECW to learn – to guide and advise - "a mentor is a person who helps another person learn", (Jowett, p. 20 1998). This can be expanded to include improvement in grades, overcoming assessment difficulties, clarifying issues or any problems the student may have and generally facilitating their learning experience, making it more rewarding and enjoyable.

The concepts of mentoring and the way in which the process of remediation in the different modes of communication (i.e. synchronous and asynchronous, online and classroom) can influence the mentoring process and shape how students perceive their mentors. The key distinction between mentoring online (e-mentoring) and traditional mentoring (t-mentoring) is highlighted by Hamilton and Scandura (2003, p.388) who believe that the foundation of mentor-protégé relationship, the 'face-time' between these key actors is transformed and the relationship "rests on a different type of interaction than that found in traditional mentoring". This transformation creates a unique environment where participants experience reduced levels of social cues, allowing greater opportunities for women and minorities to interact enabling "leaner communication channels that allow for more direct information transfer" (Hamilton and Scandura 2003, p.389).

They also argue that e-mentoring permits greater flexibility, especially in the areas of creating and sustaining relationships, offering greater convenience and widening access to a greater body of knowledge via a diverse range of mentors. Hawkridge (2003, p.22) corroborates this with his research at the Open University, where he discovered that "the new technology benefits distant learners of many kinds" – helping them to reach out for assistance whilst sustaining the learning experience. What is apparent from the literature is that e-mentoring is more than just 'support on a computer'; it encourages performance support, knowledge management and more importantly dissemination of information. E-learning involves not only access to training materials but also offers the teacher opportunities to manage learning in a coherent and concise manner – providing direction over both content and administration (Pearson, 2001). The same can be argued for e-mentoring and research on PAL–Online, where it not only provided support, but afforded e-moderators the opportunity to be proactive and monitor participation in all areas of student involvement.

RATIONALE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

E-College Wales (ECW) has been developed by the University of Glamorgan and its partner colleges throughout Wales. ECW is one of Europe's largest on-line learning initiatives and is regarded as a cornerstone of the National Assembly's Entrepreneurship Action and is jointly funded through the European Union's Objective One strategy. Its objective is to make Wales' economy stronger through encouraging the creation and survival of new businesses and through the continued professional development of the people of Wales. ECW began in October 2001 and there are currently around 500 students studying on the three courses available – BA Enterprise, Foundation Degree (Business Administration) and MA Professional Development. All ECW courses are delivered through the Internet using Blackboard software. Blackboard is simple to use and all students are trained to use it during their induction period. ECW is based on a 'clicks and mortar' approach, whereby the student learns on-line using state of the art technology, whilst having access to physical support through ECW's network of colleges across Wales and the University of Glamorgan. All course materials are available on-line, including course notes, worksheets etc. via the Blackboard system, and students also have access to college and university libraries if they need to borrow books or get access to traditional learning resources. Basically ECW have combined the classroom with the computer to offer their students a unique and comprehensive education (www.e-collegewales.co.uk).

An independent evaluation of ECW was carried out in spring 2003, to assess and consider the vision of e-learning within the University of Glamorgan from the viewpoint of students and staff. It broadly considered the management of the implementation of ECW, student satisfaction, the student learning experience, the e-moderator experience and staff reflections from the different groups involved in development and support.

One of the main findings from the evaluation, which reflects much of the work of current literature on the limitations and barriers of e-learning (Christian-Carter, 2000; Laurillard, 1993), was the need for an enhanced support framework that satisfied the needs of the student, with students articulating the need for a mentoring system designed to support students. They recognised that e-learning can be an isolating experience and would appreciate contact with a more experienced student (Graff et al. 2003). PAL – Online was therefore introduced into ECW in October 2003 to help address the concerns highlighted in the evaluation.

It is offered to all students currently studying on a BA Enterprise Award (around 200 students), combining the best of new technology with a more traditional teaching approach. To achieve this, the basic framework of PAL – Online revolves around asynchronous discussion forums and is organised primarily by a team of mentors, all second and third year students, who have done well on the course and have volunteered their services. It is important to remember that the mentors are not lecturers, and do not possess the same knowledge, insight or understanding of course material as a tutor, but they do have experience of participating in and completing the module or assignment that their protégés may be having trouble with and can assist on a different level – through experience. This support is only offered via the on-line community currently being offered to ECW students and involves no face-to-face contact. It is not intended to be a substitute for any tutor led discussion but merely a support mechanism that complements the work of the tutor, the main 'selling point' of the scheme being 'where students help students'.

METHODOLOGY

This project builds upon existing literature and examines data drawn from a leading edge e-learning environment – its principle aim being to determine the impact of peer assisted learning in an online environment. In this preliminary study the methodology consists of qualitative and quantitative methods, offering a blended approach that utilises traditional qualitative methods, such as a focus group, with an informal questionnaire that was e-mailed to all students. These methods enable analysis of participation data, whilst allowing the researcher the chance to analyse the content of discussion and the opportunity to evaluate the real needs of the e-student.

FINDINGS

Exclusive of the research for this initial study which is based around five general questions, the Quality and Research team based at the University of Glamorgan provide participation statistics on all modules, including PAL-Online. The following demonstrates the hits (pages viewed) and threads (e-mails posted) for the first fifteen weeks that PAL-Online was operational;

Table 1

	Hits	Threads
Year 1	1953	46
Year 2	2632	91
Year 3	3553	97
Totals	8138	234
Weekly Average	558	16

These statistics demonstrate an interesting divide between actively participating with a thread and learning from lurking (just viewing) and supports some recent research that argues it is valid for participants to interact at different levels, depending on the context of the discussion and their learning needs (CPsquare Lurker Project 2003). The culture of the Internet allows you to link, lurk, and learn. Once you lurk you can pick up the genre of that community, and you can move from the periphery of these discussion forums to interact with colleagues safely. It has provided a platform for perhaps the most successful form of learning that civilization has ever seen, (John Seely Brown of PARC Xerox cited in Schrage 2002). These initial findings seem to corroborate this as the majority of respondents, whether actively participating or not, perceived PAL-Online as being a positive support mechanism and the volume of hits validates this platform and its success in helping e-students to learn. However, the value of peripheral participation (lurking) has been questioned by those people who are actively involved in the discussion. The CPsquare Project (2003) concluded that concern was expressed that while non contributors may be meeting their learning needs, the wider group needs active participants to 'value add' for all members in order to support the long term sustainability of the community.

Out of the 27 respondents 23 (85%) had used PAL-Online with 11 (48%) posting a thread (e-mail) to the discussion forums and 12 (52%) only viewing the information. Only 4 respondents (15%) stated that they had never used the scheme while 2 (50%) declared that they were happy with tutor support and 2 (50%) stating that they only found time to work on module course work.

The benefits of PAL-Online were identified as:

- Being able to contact someone who has experienced the course and who can encourage, provide feedback and offer a feeling of comfort.
- Overcomes isolation – makes it more like traditional learning experience.
- Students like the ability to 'talk' online to another student – someone on their level and feel less intimidated by their peers and more willing to ask stupid questions.
- Can address gaps in the course material, ensures broader feedback and frees up tutors time.
- Aids motivation, re-assures the student and offers them a way of checking understanding of academic material.
- The flexible nature of the course and the response time from mentors surprised students and provided support when tutor was unavailable (e.g. over Christmas and weekends).

The limitations of using the scheme were various and identified as being impersonal, difficult to assess ability of mentor, limits to mentors knowledge, difficulty in explaining exactly what the problem was and lack of face-to-face contact.

The next question focused on the effectiveness of PAL-Online to overcome the barriers to learning that included issues such technology, time management, isolation and study issues. The majority of responses were positive and included statements such as:

- "Yes, overcomes fear of e-learning, I'm not afraid to 'play around' with the forums in PAL".
- "Yes, it helps me on issues such as time-management, gives me tips on how to study and helps with my understanding of the course material".
- "Yes, I can ask a mentor the simple questions that I would never ask my tutor".
- "Yes, it helps overcome the feeling of isolation – I feel like the mentors are more like friends".
- "Definitely, I would not be able to cope without PAL – I would have probably withdrawn from the course".
- "Yes, using PAL has helped save me time".

There were some negative comments that concentrated on the need to use PAL-Online only in conjunction with the tutor and one respondent stated that "the scheme actually introduced more barriers as it seemed to be another learning forum". When questioned on how it could be improved, respondents agreed that the main areas of focus were to introduce face-to-face sessions, install pictures of the mentors with a short biography, initiate regular virtual classrooms or chat rooms and introduce a FAQ section.

CONCLUSION

Evaluating the impact of PAL-Online on an e-learning program such as ECW highlights a very convincing and persuasive argument that a peer assisted mentoring scheme offers many benefits to an e-student and can assist in making the learning experience more rewarding and assist in overcoming many of the barriers to e-learning. The majority of respondents profited from the approach of the mentors, recognising that this form of support offered a different level of assistance based on the experiences of the mentors. It is this experience that students identified as a vital component of the scheme. As one respondent commented "this is even more important in an e-learning environment, we've all been to school and experienced the classroom – yet few of us have studied online before. To be able to discuss issues with someone who has been there and done it… is invaluable". This paper also identifies a gap in the current literature, the value that experience can offer an e-learning program and how it can be utilized to enhance the learning environment of the e-learner. This research project will evolve over time, the suggestions for improving the scheme will be implemented and more in-depth primary data collected, with the potential outcome involving peer assisted mentoring schemes being included in future e-learning programmes. However, this initial study advocates that mentors, especially those defined as peer

mentors, can be an integral part of the e-learning machine, providing invaluable support founded on their experience and making the e-students' lonely and sometimes bewildering journey far less demanding.

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