

Tutor Support: The Students' Experience in an Asynchronous MBA Course

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration and interaction supported by communications technologies is a defining feature of networked management learning as an educational approach (Hodgson and Watland, in press). Within this context, interaction between student and tutor becomes a critical component of the educational process (Dewey, 1938, Rogers, 1951, Vygotsky, 1978). As part of an ongoing doctoral research in investigating the student's experience of tutor support in open and distance learning, this poster session offers an opportunity to explore the preliminary findings and interpretations of a pilot study of five in-depth interviews with distance learning students enrolled in a Canadian executive MBA program. As Kvale (1996) states, "If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them? (p. 1)"

Keywords

Tutor support, interaction, students' experience, networked management learning, symbolic interaction, social constructionism

INTRODUCTION

To put the argument simply, interaction and aspects of interaction between the student and tutor is a well established as a significant aspect of the learning process and is one of the main constructs in education and open and distance learning (ODL) research (Anderson, 2003; Garrison, 2000; Lentell, 2003; Moore, 1989). Further the emerging epistemology of social constructionism within technology supported management education and ODL grants greater importance to the student as active participant and constructor of their own learning (Rumble, 2001; Leidner and Jarvenpaa, 1995). If we accept that knowledge is socially constructed and individually significant, then the individual students' experience of their interaction with tutors would seem to move to the foreground of research. Thus Saljo (1988) notes, "Access to *the learner's perspective* or the activities of teaching and learning is essential for understanding educational phenomena - and for improving education" (emphasis in original, p.35). Yet few research studies have provided for comprehensive explorations of the students' experience of tutor support with description and prescription outweighing empirical enquiry, often in the form of 'how to do it' guidance for tutors in an effort to perhaps create 'tutor-proof' instructional methods (Gibson, 2003; Simpson and Galbo, 1986; Robinson, 1995).

Using an interpretive inquiry, this pilot study is an attempt to gain a better understanding of the students' experience of tutor support. The methodological approach used is informed by a social constructionist (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and phenomenological symbolic interactionist (Blumer, 1969) perspective and follows a narrative approach (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Lieblich et al, 1998) to explore the students' meaning-perspective of their experience. As Simpson and Galbo (1986) argue, "Actual experience cannot be shared because one individual cannot have the identical experience of another. Thus, we humans do not communicate our experience but what the experience means to us" (p. 38).

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