

# Promoting Best Practice for E-tutoring through Staff Development

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## ABSTRACT

The continuous stampede into the distance learning market combined with the introduction of virtual learning environments into on-campus courses in order to increase student numbers, widen access and meet the demands of lifelong learning, now places greater demands on face-to-face teaching staff. However, the cyberspace classroom is quite different from that of the face-to-face classroom and substantial pedagogical shifts will be required for successful online learning. But what is being done to help traditional teaching staff cope with these new pedagogical shifts? How will traditional teaching staff move from teaching in front of a class to teaching in the online environment? This paper will present the arguments that suggest that there is a need for staff who have only taught in the face-to-face situation to receive comprehensive training for their new online role if they are to meet the challenges and demands that online learning/teaching presents.

## Keywords

distance education, online learning, staff development, learning technologies, e-moderating, e-tutoring, e-learning, facilitation, role of the online tutor.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout my recent studies for the MA in Open and Distance Education from the Open University, a fully online course, I became more and more aware of the importance of the tutor and the impact that he/she can have in any distance education (DE) course. This awareness didn't just arise from what I was learning from the course materials but from my own experiences of being a distance learner. Time and time again it struck me that no matter whether we are considering issues of learner support, course design, course development, quality assurance, etc, the role of the tutor is vital to the success of any DE course. Yet, many HEIs offer no staff development or training for face-to-face teaching staff adopting this important role.

From information gleaned from a survey undertaken as part of my MA project, it was clear that many traditional face-to-face teaching staff had received no professional development or training for their new role of online tutor. Indeed, of those surveyed, only 5% of academic staff indicated that they had received any development/training in how to *teach* in the online environment. 80% of academic staff indicated that they had received limited training in how to use the technology.

This paper will give a brief introduction to the concept of DE along with an overview of the present teaching 'role' in HE. It will then continue by presenting various arguments on why staff development/training is necessary for e-tutoring, what type of training should take place and the cultural implications that this places on higher education institutions (HEIs) implementing DE programmes.

## THE DISTANCE EDUCATION CONCEPT

There are many arguments as to whether distance education is a discipline in its own right or whether it is simply a different mode of what we regard as traditional higher education. This paper cannot present these arguments but whether one agrees with the former or latter of these two views, there can be no argument regarding the way in which distance education should be approached and which is best described by Moore and Kearsley (1996):

*"Distance education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires **special** techniques of course design, **special** instructional techniques, **special** methods of communication by electronic and other technology as well as **special** organisational and administrative arrangements". (p2)*

What do such statements mean for traditional lecturing staff who need to get involved in distance education and who may have to adopt the role of online tutor?

If we examine the present teaching role for most academic staff we will see that it covers a range of roles, depending on historical and cultural traditions, institutional characteristics, conceptions of teaching and learning, individual experience and type of teacher personality. Nowadays, however, there is a great deal of talk about paradigm shifts and technological revolutions taking place in teaching. We read about 'e-moderating', 'e-tutoring', 'e-facilitation', etc, and we read about the need for major shifts from the teacher's teaching to the learner's learning. But what does all this mean for the traditional face-to-face teacher?

Despite not having a 'uniform role' for teachers, most educators would agree that teaching is a communicative process and that the task for any teacher is to challenge the intellect and inspire the minds of learners through dialogue and discourse. New technologies are not a threat to this process. Indeed, if used properly, they have the capability of *enhancing* the relationship between teachers and learners. What these new technologies do change, however, is the way in which that communicative process is implemented. Hence, the traditional face-to-face lecturer may not find it easy to move from standing in front of a class to sitting in front of a computer to teach - from being what Rowntree (no date), describes as '*the sage on the stage*' '*to the guide on the side*'.

## THE NEED FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Many traditional teaching staff adopting the role of the role of online tutor are often persuaded to do so on the view promoted by management that:

they already lecture on the subject and have plenty of notes,

students won't exactly be knocking on their door – a few emails is really all they will have to deal with,

It is just a matter of tidying up their existing lecture notes and sending them to students,

they just need to find a 'techie' to help them set up a website,

it's about facilitation - they don't have to actually teach, only 'facilitate' students learning.

The adoption of distance learning by 'traditional' universities, therefore, appears to be based on finding ways of presenting lectures and tutorials through various types of technology without changing very much the function or the content of the lecture. This has led to the situation where any change to the role of the teacher is perceived mainly as a need for greater and more thorough planning and preparation of his/her lectures rather than the need to learn new skills.

From information gleaned from a survey undertaken as part of the author's MA in Open and Distance Education, it was clear that many traditional face-to-face teaching staff had received no professional development or training for their new role of online tutor. Indeed, of those surveyed, only 5% of academic staff indicated that they had received any development/training in how to teach in the online environment. 80% of academic staff indicated that they had received limited training in how to use the technology.

All UK HE institutions (excluding the Open University) were surveyed by means of a web-based questionnaire designed to gather information on the number of HEIs offering DE programmes, the delivery methods they used and the reasons why they decided to offer DE courses. Questions relating to their justification for the associated financial investment and resources involved in offering DE courses were also posed within this questionnaire. Analysis of this survey is ongoing, however, a representative sample of the

responses to date has been analysed and the identification of the need for staff development in the online learning environment has been significant.

The responses received from the questionnaire would appear to support a study undertaken by The Centre for the Study of Networked Learning (CSNL), University of Sheffield, which examined the 'readiness' of a traditional university for implementing ICT-based learning and teaching. The survey found that there was a lack of awareness and knowledge of what was going on in the university regarding online learning amongst its staff. Though people were working away at the pedagogy of online learning, there was no formal infrastructure, any expertise in the area was unco-ordinated and fragmented, there was no strategic thinking and development was ad hoc. The study also highlighted the need for a cultural shift.

## TEACHING WITH NEW TECHNOLOGY

When teaching with new technology, the most common form of training given to faculty is showing them how to use the technology rather than how the technology can be used to aid the teaching and learning process.

According to Salmon, in her article, *The March of the Moderators*, (no date):

*'online teaching and learning changes the scope and the competencies we require of academics and lecturers. It changes what we actually do with students'.*

Salmon suggests that online teachers (the people she calls e-moderators) do not themselves have enough training to make the online teaching environment successful for productive learners. She makes the point that we come across very often in distance education, that:

*" where training is provided, it concentrates on the use of the technology rather than on the role of the online teacher".*

The shift to online learning poses enormous challenges to traditional teaching staff and their institutions. The cyberspace classroom is very different from the face-to-face classroom and many of the approaches used in face-to-face teaching will not work in the online environment. Neither can it be assumed that a good face-to-face lecturer will be a good online tutor.

Teaching online requires a different set of skills and a different pedagogy to that of the classroom, none of which can be developed quickly or easily. Though the course materials may carry the majority of what learners are to learn, it is the tutor who will have the responsibility to evaluate whether students are actually gaining in their knowledge of the subject. Thorpe (2000) states that:

*"such evaluation will be achieved by learners and tutors speaking, arguing, presenting their views, etc, hence the ability of tutors to stimulate learners towards an active rather than passive learning process is vital". (p71)*

It is this interaction between learners and their tutors that makes learning a dynamic process. However, the extent to which learners will interact within this new e-learning environment will be dependent on the ability of the tutor to make his/her students feel 'comfortable' and encourage them to participate.

A review of the literature on theories of learning highlights the importance of the relationship between teacher and student in distance education courses. For example, Morgan (1997) discusses a study by Llaurillard that suggested that the approach that students took to learning was dependent on their perceptions of the learning environment. Programmes of study that had poor student/teacher relationships tended to reduce the quality of learning. Learners who had a good teacher/learner relationship and who were aware of the demands of their programme of study, adopted a much deeper approach to their learning.

## USING EXISTING TEACHING SKILLS FOR THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

An article by Smith (2001) that compared online conferencing with face-to-face tutorials in order to establish whether online tutoring required *new* skills or an extension of *existing* face-to-face skills concluded that teachers who already used the pedagogy of student-centred learning in face-to-face teaching were well placed to transfer their skills to the online environment. If we consider what Mason (1991) regards as the three key roles of the online tutor:

**Organisational** : setting the agenda for the conference, the objectives, timetable and procedural roles and managing the interactions,

**Social** : creating a learning environment which is conducive to thought, creativity and self-esteem,

**Intellectual:** acting as educational facilitator, ie, focusing discussion on crucial points and probing responses to encourage students to expand and build on comments,

we can see that these activities are to be compared more with the tutor of small, face-to-face tutorials rather than that of the lecturer who gives mass instruction. In many instances, however, the role of the tutor in small face-to-face tutorials is given over to post-graduate students or the less experienced lecturer. Even where this is not the case, the face-to-face teacher will still have to be made aware of the differences between online conferencing and face-to-face tutorials, for example unlike the face-to-face tutorial, online conferencing:

places greater emphasis on written skills,

produces a more formal tone,

does not follow a linear conversation but instead promotes multiple conversations

does not confine teaching to specific times

places greater emphasis on student-student learning

requires teachers to develop new ways of encouraging participation

requires teachers to assess the worth of online contributions

Even for the more experienced face-to-face lecturer, therefore, there is still much to be learned about the skills required for DE.

When taking up their original post of lecturer most new lecturers have no idea of how to teach and in many instances, how people learn, other than what they themselves have experienced. They will just stand up and do it. Some may try to model themselves on someone whom they thought was a good teacher, someone from whom they themselves felt they learned well, and each will have his/her own opinions of what makes a good teacher.

According to Lentell, (1994) this model of teaching is being challenged by:

*"a growing awareness of students' learning needs and learning processes, the role of tutors in the mediation of learning and the increasing emphasis on clients, customers and total quality management in production and delivery".*

In the world of distance education, the teacher is unable to stand up in front of a class, hence the link that once existed between teacher and students is broken. This means that we have to think more about **how** people learn. In DE, therefore, we have to place greater emphasis on the *process of learning* rather than on teaching and teaching activities now need to promote the *facilitation* of learning, a term that we read and hear much about these days but what does being a facilitator mean?

## **from teacher to facilitator**

Being a facilitator represents a major shift from the model that most of us consider to represent the teacher. The teacher is no longer the sole source of information as students can now discuss ideas, share information and exchange ideas with other students through online conferencing facilities and email. According to Beaudoin, (1996) this can be a difficult and threatening situation for teachers to deal with because they themselves are products of classroom-bound education and their professional image is that of the traditional teacher at the front of the classroom and at the centre of the learning process. In exploring the instructor's changing role in distance education he makes the point that the teaching function is not becoming obsolete but that:

*'teachers must now recognise the role of instructional technology as a learning resource'. (page 2).*

In distance education, the role of teacher and student is seen as a partnership when allied with the technology. What is to be learned is already contained within the course materials, what the tutor has to do is to find ways of helping learners to internalise the content of those materials and make it their own.

When discussing what can be done to aid traditional lecturing staff to acquire the skills necessary to become effective distance facilitators, Beaudoin (1996) points out that commitment from all levels and top administration in particular, to provide on-going

training that deals with how to teach at a distance and not merely how to manipulate new instructional technology is essential.

## What Kind of Training is Needed?

Assuming that teachers know what they expect their learners to be able to do at the end of a course, they will have to adopt and foster new methods of teaching-learning conditions that shift the focus to how students actually learn. They will also need to know how technological resources can be used to facilitate learning and to enhance their own effectiveness.

Salmon, (2000) suggests that training and induction for traditional staff of HEIs in becoming successful online tutors needs to follow a five-stage process that can only be accomplished through the online environment. The five stages are:

- access and motivation – at this stage student expectation of the tutor is very high
- online socialisation – building an online community
- information exchange – where students start to share information and ideas
- knowledge construction – relate new knowledge to what they already know
- development – the stage where learners become responsible for their own learning.

Salmon reminds us that that it is *'by experiencing the learning that the meaning is constructed'* hence she suggests that the best way to learn to e-moderate is through the environment itself. Salmon's idea would suggest that we need to strike a balance between the possibility of giving academics a training programme which introduces them to online teaching *before they have actually experienced the online environment* and a programme that requires them to 'pick up' the skills needed for online learning along the way when they are deeply entrenched in their new role. Training, therefore should result in the implementation of a programme that gives lecturers *what they need when they need it*.

At the very outset, however, lecturers will need to be trained in the technology and there may be issues that they need to be made aware of *before* getting involved in the online environment. For example, the importance of the socialisation process, how to deal with 'lurkers', spotting potential dropouts, etc. Being made aware of such issues at the outset, may help to ensure greater quality assurance in the teaching and learning aspects of DE.

For most online courses the quality of the 'package' does not end on receipt of the material and the quality of the course is often determined by the students' perception of the tutor - how he/she responds to their needs. How well students perform on a course is often dependent on the skills of the tutor in dealing with technological frustrations, administration problems, personal problems, etc. Having the 'right' attitude for the role of DE tutor, therefore, is essential.

## ensuring quality through staff development

In their discussion about quality assurance for teaching and learning in ODE, Mills and Tait in their article *The Impact of ICT* (no date) state that:

*"in order to support quality assurance, there needs to be training for tutors in the enhanced skills of the facilitation of learning through the moderation of electronic discussions and assistance to students in identifying databases and websites. Tutors need to be able to identify who has not participated, how threads of discussion can be identified and how analysis of interaction can be carried out so that contradictions in arguments can be laid bare for examination". (no page number)*

***One of the main questions to be asked when considering training for staff, therefore, is: Are senior management committed to the DE concept?*** Is distance education to be seen as a core activity or is it just going to be a peripheral activity, i.e, something that happens on the sidelines - but not really taken seriously. If DE is regarded as a core activity then institutional support for staff development is required and the associated need for additional resources taken on board

Sadly, the need for cost-cutting has led to many HEIs seeing online work as a cheap way of reaching more learners and to assume that people who can teach face-to-face can also teach online. Such management attitudes have led to the situation where much of the time taken to learn new methods of course design/development and delivery is done on top of an academic's existing duties and often with less organisational support than he/she would like.

The implications for organisations implementing DE, therefore, is that they need to become learning organisations – those which research and learn from their practice and which operate a culture of learning amongst their staff.

## Creating a 'quality' culture

The reputation enjoyed by any organisation is based on the quality, reliability, delivery and price of its product. Of these, quality is by far the most important because it is this element that will retain customers. A key concept in quality management is that the organisation, its subsystems and the individuals within it, are committed towards the service of customers. Quality involves meeting customer requirements and expectations and these are not restricted to the functionality of any product or service that is provided. There are expectations on delivery, the relationship the customer will have with the organisation, the transfer of information and customer service and support. Thus, total quality management (TQM) is a comprehensive approach to improving competitiveness, effectiveness and planning for future developments.

Ultimately, TQM is focused on the requirements of the customer. The High Street customer's response to poor service is generally withdrawal of custom and buying elsewhere. University customers are no different and it is important to note that within DE in particular, students consider themselves to be paying customers. As Lentell 1994, pp29-30 points out :

*"staff development has had to be expanded not only because the job of the tutor has been expanded but, more importantly, because the relationship of the student to the organisation has been redefined. The student is now a 'customer' a purchaser of services – and might if not served adequately take his/her custom elsewhere".*

The emergence of the global higher education economy will mean that higher education will become increasingly market driven. Universities, will need to adopt a TQM approach to DE that will allow them to meet market demand, a strong element of which will be the ability to deliver the right product at the right time if they are to remain competitive.

Staff development is central to a TQM approach, yet this sophisticated management tool is still not much discussed or used in education. This is not to say that concern about quality has not increased, it has, but by piecemeal activities.

## conclusion

This paper highlights the need for staff development for traditional face-to-face lecturing staff who become online tutors. These members of staff will be required to use communication technology in their new role as an online tutor and will require training in that technology. However, from this paper it is equally clear that training in the pedagogical issues associated with on line teaching is essential if they are to use the technology effectively for the teaching and learning.

This paper has discussed the difficulties that traditional lecturing staff will experience in the transition from their existing face-to-face role to that of an e-moderator. Whilst recognising that their existing teaching skills can be incorporated into the online environment, the paper further highlights the need for HEIs to introduce staff development and training which will place greater emphasis on the *process of learning* within DE rather than the *instructional technology used* to deliver the DE materials which, in essence, should be viewed as a learning resource.

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