Tutor Interventions in Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss the conditions which are necessary for active engagement of students in electronic conferences. We outline results from three modules of a part-time distance degree, where engagement has approached 100%, and describe the type of tutor practice which we believe leads to high levels of student participation.

Keywords

E-learning, distance learning, conversation.

INTRODUCTION

The distance learning sector is expanding rapidly. Students who enter distance learning often bring with them a wide range of interests and skill levels, and one of the roles of the tutor is to explore and build on these. This presents a serious challenge, and the difficulties associated with this are perhaps reflected in the high attrition rates for many distance learning courses. However, the new electronic communications media enable an expansion of the range of tutor support which can be provided. For example, face to face tutorials and telephone conversations may now be supplemented with , or replaced by, e-mail and electronic conferencing. Nevertheless, the high expectations of students and tutors on the introduction of e-conferencing have often remained unfulfilled. One possible explanation is the failure of e-moderators to share examples of good practice with colleagues.

The learning process necessarily involves a dialogue between teacher and learner, and also between peer groups of learners. It follows that good e-moderating practice must facilitate all of these interactions. Whereas such discourse may occur naturally in face to face environments, some serious planning is required of teachers who wish to make this happen in distance situations.

methods AND FINDINGS

The raw material for the survey was from a part-time degree, taught to 'distance' students from the University of Wales , Bangor (Holyfield *et al*., 2002). Conference messages were classified according to their content, e.g. technical questions, organisational matters, or academic content relevant to the module. A frequency distribution was plotted of the messages in the latter category (Figure 1). This demonstrates active participation by virtually all the students, and shows no evidence of excessive domination of the conferences by any individuals.

Figure 1. Frequency distribution showing the messaging records of a group of 19 students. Values are means (+/- s.e.) of three separate conferences, each relating to a different module.

CONCLUSIONS

We consider that the likely reasons for this level of success include:-

- Regular and appropriate tutor interventions. The prime aim is to provoke discussion. This is achieved mainly by setting tasks, asking questions, and summarising student contributions.

- Friendly relationships between group members. This is encouraged by the distributed software (*Colloquia*). Students do not have the feeling that discussion is taking place 'out there', or that their contributions come under excessive scrutiny. Group size is limited to a maximum of 20 students.

- Close integration of the discussion with other learning resources (e.g. lectures, recommended reading materials). Although contributions are not assessed, students perceive them to be a core component of their course.

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