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SUPPORTING AN ODL COURSE
FOR FINANCIAL AUDITORS

The design of an ODL course presented by Lukowiecki (1999) highlights videoconferencing and the Web as the main teaching channels. Focused on these two media, this essay intends to show a support system capable of supporting both the learners and the learners' supporters. For this, it presents some general considerations about learner support, identifies the needs of learner support before, during and after an ODL course, shows through which roles and which media these needs are met by the supporters, and finally comments on the support of the support providers themselves.

CONSIDERATIONS ON LEARNER SUPPORT

Conceptualising Learner Support

A broad approach to learner support includes any type of help to the student's learning process, provided by whoever and wherever. However, for the purposes of this essay, learner support is being considered as an specific system of the teaching institutions, especially those which teach at a distance. In this regard some authors involved in this matter are quoted.

Thorpe (1988) defines learner support "as all those elements of an ODL system capable of responding to a known individual learner. It involves interpersonal interaction between people where each knows the identity of the other and each has a specific role with regard to the other. They may not know much more than each other's name, and that one is there to learn and the other to facilitate the learning. Nonetheless, each person will bring particular expectations about their roles and mutual interaction as supporters and learners" (pp 61).

Tait (1995) asserts that student support is essential and complementary to the mass-produced materials which are provided for students regardless of prior experience, personal needs and preferred learning styles. For this reason he argues that those activities which are commonly referred to within distance education as student support such as tuition, counselling, and organisation of study centres, should have the notion of 'supporting individual learning' as a key conceptual component.

According to Scott et al. (1997) "In an ideal educational environment the student should be seen as a whole person whose learning takes place in the context of past experiences, present circumstances and future hopes and aspirations. Educational guidance and support is at the heart of this view. This means providing support which is both responsive and developmental. Responsive guidance and support involves providing effective responses to enquires and student needs and problems as they arise. Developmental guidance and support is concerned with the student's overall progress, across all courses and study programmes; and with their educational, vocational and personal development. In most universities the support services tend to be responsive, but not developmental." (pp 4)

New technologies in Learner Support

According to Tait (1996) the drive for increased volumes and more intense use of resources in the open universities might have to shift the student support services from their capacity to offer interaction towards a bureaucratised and impersonal system. This author says that "as pressures on established methods of student support lead to more industrialised and bureaucratised systems, new technologies – in particular CMC – have begun to offer opportunities for the apparently irrepressible human insistence, however low-key it sometimes appears, on interaction."((pp. 68). And goes on to say "electronic conferencing, in its capacity to engender and support 'conversation' and 'community' represents a force in counterweight to the increasingly bureaucratised systems of student support"(pp 70).

According to Scott et al. (1997) "The new computer based media provide a particularly interesting addition to student support systems since, in addition to facilitating tuition and making information available, they have considerable potential to support advisory and guidance activities, to overcome potential student isolation, and to build links between students and the university... With the growth of networking, and in particular the growing penetration of the Internet into even the domestic world, students can now access remote, dynamic and rapidly updated electronic resources with ease. This medium also offers an opportunity for communication through the use of conferencing and email. Thus, even very remote students can have access not just to information but also to expert advice and guidance and to the ability to network (in the social sense!) with peers." (pp. 2 and 4)

In the discussion of the motion 'Online teaching is the beginning of the end for leaner support' proposed by Thorpe (1999), several messages from Tony's group show that the new technologies are changing the characteristics of support but are not doing away with it. To the contrary, the technologies which allow interactive communication at a distance, of the many-to-many type, whether synchronously such as the videoconference or asynchronously such as the debate forums mediated by the computer, may improve, and greatly, the support which has been supplied to an inadequate measure prior to the age of telecommunications and Information technology.

IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS OF THE LEARNERS

According to Thorpe (1999 a), the planning of support tasks starts with an accurate study of who the learners are, their learning circumstances, and their demands. Rowntree (1999) also states that "knowledge about our learners could help us decide what kind of support system we need to develop to meet learners' needs. Without it we cannot be sure of providing them even with what they would see as a relevant learning experience, let alone a satisfying one." (pp 22)

Lukowiecki (1999), referring to the ODL Course for Financial Auditors, says that all companies as well as the homes of the intended learners are equipped with computers connected to the Internet, and that the most of these companies are also equipped with multipoint videoconferencing rooms; the ones that are not so equipped could use videoconferencing rooms of another institution located in the same or neighbouring city.

Borrowing from Lewis (1995) the idea of listing the needs of the workplace learner, below is a list of the needs of learner support before, during and after the course, especially those related to Videoconferencing and the Web.

Before the course

In order to be able to make the decision to 'buy' the course or not, in its totality or some of its modules, the learners need information about the course, about who is behind it, and what the requirements and

procedures for enrolment are. Here the learner support needs is including not only those of the intended learners themselves but also those of the employers, since these are the ones who pay for the course.

Upon enrolling in the course, the learner needs more detailed information, such as: who are the teachers, tutors and co-ordinators, which subject matters and bibliography will be used, what is the videoconferencing schedule, how the videoconferencing and Web site systems will work, how to get the most out of a distance course, how the evaluation and certification systems will work.

During the course

Considering that the videoconferencing classes are similar to the conventional classroom, the learners already know how to behave with the teacher and their classmates, and that is why most of the support needs are related to the use of the medium itself. In the case of the Web, in addition to the support needs inherent to the medium, the learner requires assistance in the new learning forms which involve activity and interactivity, usually low in a conventional classroom. Below we show the type of support that the learner needs in order to learn through videoconferencing and the Web.

Among the things the learners need to know during videoconferencing are the following: how many sites are connected simultaneously and where they are, how many auditors are present at each site, which company they work for and what their previous experience is, what are their own responsibilities and the responsibilities of others during the videoconferences and in the use of the web site; what positions the learners should occupy in the videoconference room, what is the available main and peripheral equipment and how it is supposed to be used by the learners. Besides that, they would like to have a controlled environment to receive and send images and sound of good quality, and to receive feedback.

Among the needs related to the Web are the following: what is the URL of the site of the course and how to record it in the bookmarks, how to better explore the course site (download , print, forum, A&Q, library, etc); when and how to address the tutor or a colleague in private; how to collaborate or ask for help from peer support; how to do research on the Internet. In addition, the learners needs to have time and a propitious environment for the online study; receive feedback, and know who to look for in the case of technical problems (by phone or personally).

After course

Once the course is finished, the learner may want to express his/her feelings with regard to the various aspects of the course, as well as to review some things which where registered at the site.

WHO ARE THE PROVIDERS OF LEARNER SUPPORT

Authors such as Thorpe (1999 a) recognise that family and community are important for all learners. She says that "Where they are a source of positive support, the ODL provider can assume that much emotional and practical support will be available to the learner. Where this is not so, the individual learner will be more isolated and potentially in need of a wider range of support from the institution" (pp70). Lukowiecki (1999 a) argues that "an institution focused on Learning assumes that the learner has his/her own resources which should be used to enrich and give meaning to his/her learning. This is why it organises itself in the sense of teaching the learner to extract from the community in which he/she lives (e.g. workplace) and from other facilities available (e.g. Internet) the support he/she needs, only "giving" something in those cases in which this is really not feasible".

The providers of the ODL Course for Financial Auditors were identified on the basis of this open concept of learner support. Thus, the support system includes, in addition to the assistance provided locally by the team connected to the institution which is offering the course, the assistance provided at the remote points by the providers of the work environment itself of the learners. Although in a learner support team other roles are in play, the ones we identify here are those directly related to learning. These are: teacher, tutor, co-ordinator, VC (videoconferencing) technician, manager and peers.

Teacher

Lukowiecki (1999) defines Teacher as that person who has a thorough knowledge of a certain content, generally is a professor in some university or an employee/manager of some company in the power industry who knows how the subject works in practice It is the teacher who defines the learning objectives, the content and the activities of the module under his/her responsibility, and leads the videoconferencing classes.

In the videoconferencing classes the teacher does not transmit the contents in the way normally transmitted in a classroom. He/she does this by creating an interactive learning environment for the auditors, and consequently all his/her support aims at facilitating learning. Acting as a learning facilitator, the role of the teacher very often merges with that of the tutor, making it difficult to define where the task of one ends and the other's starts.

In videoconferencing, the teacher is responsible for: opening with introductions, introducing himself/herself and stimulating the personal introductions of the auditors present at all sites; giving an overview of the course; making a review of agenda highlights and any ground rules; clarifying how the teacher-tutor partnership is to work; which are their responsibilities and which are the responsibilities of the learners; inform what is expected of the auditors during the course; give feedback on progress; explain how the learners will be evaluated throughout the course (formative) and at the end of the course (summative), and stimulate the participation of the auditors present at each remote point.

According to Mackenzie (1998), during the videoconferencing the presenter (the teacher) , should: a) Keep the remote audience's attention by giving attention to talking through presentations, explaining clearly each new area of the presentation, constantly summarising each section, pausing often for questions, actively attempting to involve the remote audience by asking questions, using different media to keep attention (slides, images, etc), allowing for visual gags where possible (cartoons, etc); and b) promoting discussions allowing for breaking the ice between sites, having one controller or chairperson who oversees interactions, attempting to involve everybody from all sites, attempting to use personal names whenever possible, begin talking by visually and orally identifying your name and site, allowing long time for turn taking. Bray (1995) further recommends that the teacher should start and conclude videoconferencing on time and not penalise prompt participants by waiting for latecomers.

Tutor

Tutor as that person who has a deep hands-on knowledge accumulated over years of work, and a thorough understanding of the Brazilian power industry and that of other countries. It is the tutor who leads the site on web which complements the videoconferencing accompanying the discussions in the forums, answering questions posted in the Q&A, researching and inserting URL and bibliography; giving support to the learners clearing up their doubts or forwarding their demands to whoever is competent to resolve them, and providing follow-up to make sure the learner actually receives a response. (Lukowiecki, 1999). To this she also adds, giving feedback on progress and assessing learners.

Feenberg (1989) says that the tutor acts as a 'social host' and 'meeting chairperson'. "As social host the tutor has to issue warm invitations to people; send encouraging private messages to people complimenting them or at least commenting on their entries, or suggesting what they might be uniquely qualified to contribute. As a meeting chairperson, the tutor must prepare an enticing-sounding initial agenda; frequently summarise or clarify what has been going on; try to express the emerging consensus or call for a formal vote; sense and announce when it is time to move on to a new topic. " Rowntree (1995), referring to computer conferencing adds "the tutor needs to take a lead in setting the tone of the discourse, establishing an etiquette, promoting mutual respect between participants, defusing personal antagonisms, discouraging the formation of cliques, counselling offended individuals, and generally making sure that is often used not-quite-synonymously with tutor in discussions of computer conferencing".

Soby (1992) also identifies a number of tasks for the tutor: reducing tension and making students feel comfortable, maintaining an overall view of the situation; being aware of each individual's contributions to the discussions; providing inspiration and provocations to the discussions; serving as a catalyst; directing attention to the inner dynamics of the group; pointing out mistakes and correcting them; distinguishing between problem-solving with correct answers and decision-making with no correct answers; providing references to the literature. And Rowntree (1995) add: eliciting contributions from low-profile participants, suggesting when it is time to begin or end a line discussion, setting limits to relevance, length and styles of messages, opening up a sub-conference, carrying out formal assessments of learners performance or products.

Co-ordinator

In addition to the local co-ordinator, who is an employee of the company where the ODL course will be generated, there will be a co-ordinator at each one of the remote points. Among his/her various tasks will be the one of providing support to the learners before, during and after the course. In this regard, by means of a printed guide, an online guide, telephone, email and/or videoconferencing the co-ordinators: a) provide information on the course, on the pre-requisites, the technology and means of access, on the teachers and tutors; b) they enrol the learners and records their attendance; c) they inform who are the co-ordinators and the IT supporters, and the means of communicating with them (telephone, email, etc); d) they inform on the course materials and bibliography; e) they inform how the auditors will be certified (what is required from them to obtain the certificate, who will issue the certificate, when and how it will be issued); f) they present the videoconferencing schedule (dates and times for the beginning and end of each session, the theme, the name of the teacher and the venue); g) they seek feedback from the learners with the objective of performing a running improvement on the course; h) send and get back electronic questionnaires of course evaluation. The co-ordinators are further responsible for orienting the auditors on how to get the most out of the course, creating in the company an environment propitious to individual study, taking care of the course material to be used by the learners (print and online).

VC Technicians

In addition to the co-ordinators, there will be a local VC technician and various VC technicians spread out at the remote points. Their role is to assure a controlled environment to receive and issue high quality images and sound during videoconferencing. To this end, before the beginning of the class he should inform the learners how many sites are connected simultaneously and where they are; where the learners should take their seats in the room; how they should interact with the camera and the microphones, when and how to use the control panel and the document camera.

According to Bray (1995) the functions of a videoconferencing technician are: turning on the codec and the monitors, dialling the distant sites to establish a link, controlling camera focus and field at the origination site and at the distant sites, adjusting the volume to an acceptable level, selecting the appropriate data rate, re-setting "echo cancelling" capability, switching to and from the document camera, be able to access stored frames with the VC equipment, switching to and from a computer generated output, if available, utilising a computer to generate and display multimedia presentations, using the VCR to broadcast a video for all locations, terminating the link with the distant sites and shutting down the equipment. Mackenzie (1998) adds other tasks to be performed by the technician weeks/days before the videoconferencing: to know how many sites, how many students/presenters at each site, confirm who is dialling whom and when, have alternative contact (voice) numbers available in case of technical problems, and test compatibility between different systems this is the first videoconferencing between the sites.

Manager

Lukowiecki (1999b) considers 'time' and 'usefulness' as critical factors in the ODL Course for financial Auditors. In this regard, the manager's role interferes directly in the progress and the end result of the course. Ideally the manager should be a partner of the auditor, committed to his/her learning process. The manager should be aware that a good performance on the part of the learner will bring benefit to the auditor's work and thus to the company.

Among the manager's tasks in the role of learner supporter are: help the auditor to select the course modules which can add value to his/her work, authorise his/her enrolment in the course, allow that, in addition to videoconferencing, he/she devote some hours of his/her time to study (participate in the web site, read the recommended texts, etc.), facilitate his/her access to company employees who may supply pertinent information to enrich course discussions, suggest activities or projects for the learner to undertake during the course, give feedback.

Peers

"... Although discussions about process can be prolonged, we see them as integral to the purpose of the programme; the process is indefinable from the content, and discussions about such things are nor only important, they are vital to the proper conduct of the programme and for the relationships between us all, tutors and participants alike" (MacConnel, 1992). Reflecting upon peer support, Graham (1999) states " I do find the BBS very supportive but I wonder how much that has to do with the nature of the course and the number and backgrounds of us learners. How far are we from typical and how much does that matter?"

The support system for the ODL Course for financial Auditors sees peers as important supporters in the learners' learning process. The concept of peers encompasses both the course classmates and the workplace colleagues, and these peers have tasks such as contributing with useful information, suggesting real company cases to feed the course, standing in for the auditor in some work activity which coincides with scheduled videoconferencing, avoiding interrupting their mates while they are studying.

SUPPORTING THE SUPPORTERS

Information is certainly the crucial factor in the course, both in the phase of development and of execution. It is fundamental for all the people involved in the course to be cognisant of the overall project of the course, how their tasks will contribute to the success of the project, what are the roles and responsibilities of each one. However, merely knowing what must be done may not be enough to assure that it is done well. Mainly when we are dealing with teaching technologies which are unknown or unfamiliar to most people. The incorrect interpretation of a very popular expression nowadays "learning by doing" may lead to the failure of the event

Based on the assumption that teachers, tutors and co-ordinators have prior experiences in conventional training, it is necessary for them to learn how distance training works and, particularly in the case of the ODL Course for Financial Auditors, how to create learning environments in videoconferencing and the web. For example, how to prepare the material to be shown in the videoconference and to be inserted in the web, how to use the computer and the document camera to show materials on the Videoconferencing, how to use the control panel, what are the resources available to interconnect and motivate the different audiences, how to dress and behave in front of the camera, how to use the microphones, and so forth.

As it would be complicated to learn all these things alone, the company sponsoring the course adopted the strategy of retaining a distance education and training consultant. Among the functions of this consultant is that of orienting the development of the supporters. To this end, he/she promotes specific meetings to address this matter, always seeking, whenever possible, to invite an expert to debate with the supporters; recommends their participation in courses, seminars, workshops and congresses related to the theme, promotes visits to university labs or other companies which are developing some distance education project; selects materials of any nature which can help in the development of the supporters (articles published in journals and magazines, news, papers, etc).

In addition, three other things are also identified as crucial to the good development of the supporters, and consequently of the project: dedication to the project, autonomy and funding.

The services which the supporters provide to this course have to be provided in parallel with so many other tasks on their agendas. Consequently, in addition to the self-discipline required from supporters themselves, it is necessary that the organisations for which they work allocate a sufficient number of hours exclusively to the project, including time for the development of the supporter.

The granting of autonomy, especially for the co-ordinators and VC technicians (both local and at the remote points) should not be considered as an option but should be seen formally as a necessary support to the supporters. As they are used to respecting hierarchy, it is necessary both for the managers to delegate some level of decision-making and for the employees to be ready to take on some of the decision-making.

Finally, the supply of funding in a timely fashion, in the quantity and of the quality required, also represents an important support to the supporters.

CONCLUSION

Whilst in conventional training learner support generally has been given solely by the course co-ordinator, in the case of ODL courses, especially those which use IT and telecommunications technologies, this cannot go on. Effective learner support implies necessarily in a team with different roles involves, all of them equally important to the success of the event. But, since these technologies are still very new, the supporters themselves need support in using them, and the organisations should fulfil this need.

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