Providing 'Quality Care' to International Students Through On-line Communication

Chris Perry
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
Christine.Perry@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper evaluates an approach to dissertation supervision, designed to assist international students with their academic writing. It argues that a blended approach to supervision within a Virtual Learning Environment can provide high quality individualised care not otherwise available. This leads to deeper, critical learning and more meaningful participation in Higher Education.

1. Introduction

This paper evaluates the on-line dissertation supervision of 20 postgraduate international students of Information Systems. It builds on earlier studies (Perry 2004, 2005) prompted by the evident difficulty international students experience in succeeding on their courses, a difficulty made apparent by the high incidence of alleged plagiarism (Perry 2005). A defining feature of the intervention described in this paper is the part played by on-line communication.

The 2004 study considered 3 students' progress and suggested that cautious generalizations could be made. Firstly, a blended, flexible approach to supervision is likely to be beneficial. Secondly the increased reliance on written communication in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) encourages an explicitness that is critical to success. This paper assesses the extent to which the conclusions drawn from the previous study still hold true, taking account of the progress of the whole cohort and of longer-term evidence. It further explores three key questions:

- To what extent can on-line communication provide students with individualised 'quality care' sometimes thought to be lacking in mass higher education;
- Can on-line communication facilitate the acculturation of international students into a UK university and
- Is on-line communication distinctive in the way it develops critical thinking skills?

1.1 Background

The concerns of this paper reflect the continued internationalisation of education, the growing number of students for whom the medium of instruction is a language other than their own, the disproportionate number of international students accused of plagiarism and the increased provision of virtual and distance learning in Higher Education. As McNamara and Harris (1997) and Elsey (1990) suggest, if financial concerns continue to motivate UK universities to seduce students from abroad, then there is a moral obligation to provide them with a learning context in which they can thrive.

While this study takes a non-essentialist view of international students, some generalisations may be relevant to gaining an understanding, if not always of the students themselves, then of prevailing attitudes towards them. Contrasting views of knowledge in western and non-western countries are well documented (Ballard and Clanchy 1988; Leask 2004, Perry 2005). The fact that learning styles, too, may be culturally determined (Richardson 2000) may make acculturation into the UK academy difficult for some students. It is, however, very likely that difficulties more obviously experienced by international students highlight general failings in the care provided, for example, with respect to the quality of feedback given to students (UWESU 2004; Nink 2005).

1.2 General approach

This study adopts a qualitative and reflexive case study approach. The stance taken is explicitly feminist in its concern for a vulnerable group (Griffiths 1998) and also in the prominence given to the need to provide a nurturing, inclusive learning environment.

As a female academic in a male dominated department I know from my own 'lived experience' what it means to belong to a vulnerable minority group, and empathise readily with the students in my care (Perry 2001). In terms of the conduct of this research I am very much on the inside: as supervisor, the provider of feedback and the person responding to emails, I play a key part. This central position is both a strength and weakness of the research.

1.3 Operational concepts

This section explains the use of concepts that take on specific meaning in the study: 'adequacy' of writing and 'critical' thinking.

1.3.1 Adequacy of writing

Two sources of data are used to evaluate the effectiveness of this intervention. One is the way students and staffs feel and think about the approach. The arguably more objective source is the writing itself: in defining the term 'adequate' as a descriptor of students' writing, I deal with the 'evaluative content of factual statements' (Griffiths 1998, p 50), attempting to provide a definition that is fixed within the context of this study and not subject to (too much) individual interpretation.

This study adopts the notion of threshold achievement (Moon 2004), as making explicit what students have to do in order to write a dissertation of an adequate standard. Citation is treated as an indicative skill: it is assumed that if a student is able to cite to an adequate standard, then the student's academic writing is likely to be adequate more generally. It shows the degree to which the student is able to reflect on his/her own and others' knowledge, using this knowledge to develop an argument and moving to deeper styles of learning, including metacognition.

'Adequate' writing should have the following characteristics with respect to citation:

- It should display an appreciation of recognised conventions for citation and referencing, and the writer should be able to use these conventions accurately in final submissions of work;
- It should display an awareness of when words or ideas need to be attributed;
- The reader should be able to distinguish words or ideas that are the writer's own from those of another author;
- Words or ideas of another author should be included because they are part of an argument developed by the writer;
- The way in which a writer includes these words or ideas should communicate to the reader her/his own position: the extent to which s/he views the author as an authority with whom s/he is in agreement.

1.3.2 Critical thinking.

Western models of learning, including an emphasis on critical thinking, rest on particular views of knowledge. Baxter Magolda's 'model of epistemological reflection' (Baxter Magolda 1999, p 42) and Perry's 'scheme of intellectual development' (in Richardson 2000 p 46) suggest that learners move from surface to deeper learning, as their view of knowledge develops. Citation is where academic writers make explicit how they view the knowledge of others.

Critical thinking is associated with critical language awareness (Fairclough 2001; Gee 1996), when the student gains awareness of him/herself as a writer, of the choices that are available to him/her and of the wider social and cultural implications of the choice of particular discourses. These become issues of power and of individual identity that have particular relevance for international students.

Critical language awareness may form part of a 'critical pedagogy', challenging 'the societal power structure…and reversing social inequities' (Cummins and Sayers 1990). In Gee's (1996) words, mastery of a discourse empowers the individual as a whole person, involving the 'integration of identity.'

1.4 Structure of paper and presentation and analysis of data

Section 2 presents the case study on which this paper is based. A difficulty in presenting qualitative research is in ensuring unbiased selection of data for detailed consideration (Yin 1988). I selected that which surprised or informed, rather than that which confirmed a particular bias. Firstly a brief account is given of the distinctive characteristics of the support given to students. Secondly a sample of the staff and students' views on on-line supervision is presented without interpretation. Thirdly a vignette represents the supervision of one student.

The students are disguised in such a way that both meaning and anonymity are preserved.

Section 3 evaluates the data collected and the paper concludes by considering the extent to which the intervention could be implemented more widely.

2. The case study

2.1 Overview of on-line support provided

Successful supervision appeared to be dependent on a mix of modes of communication, including some face-to-face contact to establish initial rapport, usually followed by frequent and detailed written communication. The distinctive aspects of the support were, however, computer-mediated and delivered to the students within a VLE. It comprised:

- Handbooks and guidelines
- Discussion forums set up to provide access to peer support, as well to deal with 'frequently asked questions'
- Planned feedback on students' work; email exchanges and the sending of 'marked' word processed documents, were used extensively. Feedback was carefully planned to complement guidelines given to the students on the use of different citation styles. Students were encouraged to reflect on the way citation style (direct or indirect, integral or non-integral) communicated to the reader the extent of agreement with the cited text. This level of critical language awareness is seen as indicative of critical thinking as discussed above.

2.2 Evaluation of students' writing

2.2.1 The process

At the start of the study the writing of all students was deemed to be inadequate (as defined in 1.3.1). They submitted a minimum of a further 3 pieces of work, and feedback was given as follows:

- Standard guidance along the lines of, 'you need to include more secondary literature, and to reference your work thoroughly and accurately – see your dissertation handbook' was given in response to the first draft. The adequacy of writing was measured and recorded to reflect achievement after this initial standard feedback.
- Feedback on intermediate drafts focused in greater detail on academic writing. Students were given explicit guidance in the use of different citation styles. All drafts were archived for subsequent analysis.

- Adequacy of writing in the final submission provides evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention.

While acknowledging that determining whether a student's writing has *really* improved is inevitably subjective, the study aims to make measurement of improvement transparent through the use of clearly defined descriptors. Furthermore each student's work was assessed by a minimum of two academic staff.

2.2.2 The outcome

The evaluation of students' writing outlined above provides strong evidence of the effectiveness of the blended support provided. The standard support raises the level of the students' writing to at best barely adequate. In most cases the writing continues to be inadequate.

Following the intervention two students make minimal progress, but all show some improvement. There are no cases of plagiarism. 17 students show substantial improvement, moving up at least two 'grades'.

The majority of students (13 out of 20) achieve 'more than adequate' or above in their writing. The writing of two students is 'excellent' following the intervention.

2.3 Views of supervisors and students

The following includes some of the more striking views on on-line supervision as experienced by the participants in this study, drawn from a range of sources: informal interviews, both email and face-to-face and informal discussions with colleagues. Here only a small sample can be included, but all views wholly or partly critical of on-line supervision are represented.

Students' views	Supervisors' views
It's nice when a tutor gives you proper feedback.	Email can become a sort of pseudo contact where nothing much happens – for example you can spend weeks trying to set up a meeting
I know that I am understood when I write	Email is depersonalising, and therefore more professional - the personal becomes less in email. But the supervisor may be less likely to pick up on emotional blocks in emails
The student doesn't have to worry that it might be the wrong time for an appointment or the right time to make a phone call	The asynchronous nature of email communication gives time to get over barriers and it allows the student to 'hide anxiety' but that is not always useful.
I worry sometime when I email my supervisor because it's easy to get someone upset with the wrong words	The use of email results in a better conversation. They have time to read what you've said and think about it. It is a more equal exchange.
	It is incredibly time-consuming.
	It is inclusive and helpful.
	Email communication is safe

2.4 Nadia

Nadia impresses as an extremely dedicated student: studying abroad with her husband and two small children. I initially form an impression of her as very reserved, but she emerges as warm, responsive and grateful for help given.

In spite of her demanding domestic situation Nadia has passed all her assessment at the first attempt. The majority of students and nearly all international students have to redo at least one element of their assessed work. I meet Nadia for several brief conversations before she starts work on her dissertation.

My involvement with Nadia's dissertation is relatively brief as I take over the supervision from a colleague, when she goes on leave. Also Nadia submits her dissertation early, as she has to return to her home country and wants to have completed the degree before doing so. My colleague comments on Nadia's first version in a face-to-face meeting, giving generalised reminders about the use of secondary literature and referencing. I join them for this meeting.

Nadia sends me further chapters to read quite promptly. She is working fast. Her English is generally understandable: she makes minor mistakes, for example in verb tense and number agreement, but her choice of vocabulary is accurate and she writes in the appropriate register. Her use of secondary literature is limited and referencing is incomplete. She restricts herself almost entirely to non-integral indirect citations and uses a numeric (rather than 'Author-date') referencing system.

One of Nadia's main themes in her study is the extent to which specific theories can be used for evaluating websites. Here (when the context more obviously demands it) her use of secondary sources is relatively clear, and helpful to the reader. For example, she writes,

> It is believed that … website that incorporates a managed additional set of facilities is most likely to achieve the best balance and it is more realistic. [6]

The guidance given is mainly by email in a relatively intense period during the month prior to its submission, and we have one face-to-face meeting. Our email exchanges feel extremely efficient. We are working to tight timescales and getting the job done. However, any real human warmth is reserved for face-to-face contact, when I learn that on top of her domestic chores and work on her dissertation

she also works half time as a sales assistant. I learn just how exhausted Nadia is… Her quiet manner now seems to be a form of reserving her energy.

I am aware that she is determined to submit her work early and am anxious to be encouraging – and do not wish to imply that my approach is in any way different from that of my colleague. I email advice to her as follows:

> Generally this is fine – I don't think any of the comments I have made on your work are critical.

This may not be strictly true – and I go on to give generalised advice about substantiating every statement that she makes with evidence, 'covering' myself at the same time:

> I haven't had time to reread all the chapters you have sent me, but when you proofread your final draft make sure that where possible you have:
>
> · Provided evidence for statements that you make
>
> · Referred back to specific sections in earlier chapters (to make the reader appreciate how an argument is being developed)

Next comes some more explicit advice:

> You could also improve (and vary) your use of secondary literature.
>
> The model you use most consistently is the non-integral direct quotation – where you make a statement and add the reference in brackets afterwards, for example on page 43 you write:
>
> 'As every society has different needs and priorities, there is no single universal standard model for e-government plan [5]' this is often appropriate but it is limited because:
>
> · sometimes it is difficult for the reader to tell when your views start and the quoted author's stop
>
> · it suggests total agreement with the source
>
> You could use formulations like:
>
> X suggests this… but Y points out that…
>
> Z describes e-government as… however my observations suggest that…

But I still feel the need to reassure her:

> As I said, I am generally pleased with what you've done – so don't worry unduly about my comments

This is rather confusing advice, I think in retrospect. Am I giving Nadia permission to

ignore my comments? However she does respond, supplying several specific references. For example, when she writes that 'cultural factors and society capabilities of different countries need to be considered', I ask for examples and evidence. She adds the following:

> '. Organization culture is important because normally people resist changes and different ways of encouraging the employees have to be considered (Pacific Council, 2002)…Finally the structure of government has to be considered. Some services may be private in a country while it is governmental in other country. For example, Telecommunication industry is private in the UK but it is governmental elsewhere.'

Nadia has been coaxed into providing a reference, giving more detail. Also she has responded to my more general advice: the piece is now dense with references; she is linking her sections effectively and now integrates direct quotations into her own sentences, for example:

> The term 'digital divide' is usually defined as 'access or lack of access to the Internet' (Loges and Jong).

She makes a clearer distinction between her views and those of other authors: her efforts to interpret others' views become transparent to the reader. Several times she makes a statement supported by a citation, and then interprets the significance of this with a sentence beginning, 'this means that….'. She is not resorting to mimicry, using the formulations that I have suggested; rather she is creating her own formulation, and using this formulation repeatedly. This results in writing that is adequate, but the level of sophistication and subtlety of meaning that she achieves is limited by her command of English.

When we later meet face-to-face Nadia glows when she speaks of the UK education system. She is particularly impressed by access to on-line material prepared by staff. At home the method of delivery was solely the lecture, where students desperately tried to take notes – which they later shared. Readings were recommended, but these were hard to get hold of and guidance was in any case vague and unhelpful. She seems to come to life as she speaks and it is as if the experience at a UK university has been that of a feast for the starving. Her ambition is to return to do a PhD.

Nevertheless, her experience of study in the UK has not been without difficulty and she describes how her attitude to academic writing has been transformed:

> No, she is not confident in English. Reading was very difficult at the beginning. 'The Indian students, they speak so fast'. But she does not translate 'whole sentences'. She looks up 'only words' in the dictionary. Yes, she enjoys writing …
>
> Her husband reads and corrects her written English. (He has been studying in the UK for two years longer than she has.)
>
> 'I learnt a lot that I didn't know before. What was very helpful was to be told to think about the reader: 'I thought before, reader know everything'. She says that it is even new to her husband (who has just submitted a PhD on a highly technical subject.) He didn't know 'about the reader and about references'.

3. Discussion

This section returns to the issues identified in the introduction; it assesses the evidence that a blended approach to supervision, with increased reliance on written communication, improves the quality of care of international students.

3.1 Evidence of the benefits of a blended approach to supervision

Online supervision has clear benefits. Apart from the convenience associated with asynchronous communication, access to a supervisor via email is viewed as less intimidating than approaching a closed office door. However, this study supports Jackson's (2003) view that for international students it may be particularly important to include face-to-face support. Nadia may be the exception that proves the rule: her dedication to her studies was such that the email support may have been sufficient without the face-to-face contact. However, her ability to understand the nuances of occasionally ambiguous emails may have been dependent on familiarity established face-to-face. Also, unlike all other students in the study, Nadia was not isolated from family and friends; indeed, her husband was able to support her directly with her studies.

3.2 Evidence of the benefits of written communication

The use of written guidelines and written feedback on work offers explicitness and a level of detail that is of demonstrable benefit to the majority of students in the study. It gives the opportunity to:

- Repeat guidance (for international students it is helpful to say the same thing in the same way several times);

- Adopt the apprenticeship model of learning (Lave and Wenger, 2002), where the supervisor 'shows' the student how to write in the academic style;
- Improve writing skills through the email communication itself, where the use of specialist vocabulary can be rehearsed.

The use of on-line written communication also means that wider benefits of using ICT in composition can be exploited (Perry 2004). Ease of editing text in electronic form gives it a 'provisionality' (Goodwyn 2000) that is helpful to the novice writer, encouraging the type of reworking that characterises proficient writing (Shaughnessy 1977).

Support offered to the students in this study was designed to be focused and explicit as already discussed. Conversations in writing between student and supervisor, the 'critical friend' (Goodwyn 2000, p 14) fostered such precision. Some students learned to imitate phrases and constructions used in feedback. Some appeared to learn a new language through use; others, such as Nadia learned to use limited vocabulary to develop and communicate their own independent, critical thinking. The frequency and quantity of the communication that allowed this development would not have been possible without email.

3.3 Evidence that on-line communication facilitates acculturation into a UK university and in developing critical thinking skills

Given that writing in the academic style is viewed as emblematic of western academic culture, on-line exchanges with supervisors and peers permit the student to participate – as an apprentice – in that culture, to 'practise' academic writing under the scrutiny of an expert.

Online exchanges such as that described in 2.4 suggest that the very explicitness of the advice given may lead to an overly prescriptive approach. While intending to help students to become democratic in their thinking, the tenor of my interactions (defined by this very explicitness) may, ironically, have reinforced their dependency on authority. It is crucial that the supervisor does not 'think the thoughts' for the student; rather s/he indicates the type of thoughts that are expected. These thoughts may involve subtle evaluation of others' ideas in relation to a line of argument being developed. When a supervisor points out that it is not clear whether a student agrees or disagrees with a quotation from another author (or indeed where the cited text stops and the student's interpretation or critique starts) this student may be confronting characteristics of a

hitherto unfamiliar academic culture. It is evident that Nadia took pleasure in this process of acculturation.

For none of the students in the study did critical thinking and writing skills come naturally; all required guidance of some kind. A consistent feature of this guidance was close engagement with written text and a form of 'interactive composing' evident in the account of Nadia's supervision. Again, it is difficult to imagine how this could have been achieved in the context of mass higher education without collaborative writing tools and email.

In Hunt's (2004) view authenticity is lacking in most communication experienced by students in the course of academic study. Students are reading and writing in a manner that is 'disconnected from any real social occasion or motive.' Effective communication with a supervisor – and potentially with a group of peers studying related areas – provides a meaningful social context for writing. This study confirms Henri's (1992) view that successful communication via email exhibits social, interactive, cognitive and metacognitive dimensions. Not surprisingly those email exchanges that tended to be productive, leading to improved writing, were also characterised by their interactivity and by the genuine dialogue that emerged. The exchange with Nadia provides clear evidence of the cognitive dimension in the way she exhibits deeper learning. If the metacognitive dimension is only revealed in face-to-face discussion, this does not in any way diminish her progress as a critical thinker.

3.4 Evidence of provision of 'quality care' that may be lacking in mass higher education

Goldhaber (1997 in Lankshear and Knobel 2003) reflects on computer-mediated communication as a source of much valued attention to individuals. It can provide a means of reducing the anonymity of mass higher education.

The use of the VLE for information storage and for dealing with frequently asked questions via a discussion forum, frees the supervisor to deal with the needs of individuals to a degree that would be impossible in face-to-face meetings. There is scope for responses to be more considered – of a better quality – in written communication: difficult issues or areas of confusion are relentlessly pursued until understanding is reached.

Claims are made for the democratic and egalitarian nature of electronic learning and the

way it can shift the balance of power both within a cohort and between student and teacher (Kaye 1991). Flexibility means increased equity and fairness – as different students tend to thrive in a VLE (Jackson 2003). It also means that different demands are made of the teacher who becomes coach rather than transmitter of information (Edwards et al. 2002). This is a new relationship to which some staff, as well as students, have difficulty in adapting (Saunders and Klemming 2003), as is shown by the ambivalence articulated in 2.3 towards the 'impersonal' nature of email.

Online supervision encourages greater rigour, and individualised care is inevitably time-consuming, regardless of the mode of delivery. This study argues, nevertheless, that the convenience of on-line communication, and the explicitness that results when feedback is written, contribute to a more efficient use of supervisor's time.

4. Conclusion

A blended approach to supervision within a VLE can use resources efficiently to provide high quality care. In addition to improvements in students' writing – and helping them to avoid plagiarism – there are wider benefits to be gained in terms of deeper, critical learning and meaningful participation in Higher Education.

There may, however, be difficulty in gaining full staff engagement in such an approach, as is discussed elsewhere (Perry 2005). The reflexive stance adopted in this paper draws attention to the importance of further attributes that are critical to effective supervision: commitment to, and empathy with, students as individuals. This empathetic approach is one that does not always find favour in a male dominated workplace; this may prove to be a barrier to the intervention's wider successful implementation.

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