Narrowing the distance: using e-learner support to enhance the student experience

Patrick Kelly [p.kelly@open.ac.uk]

Charlotte Stevens [c.h.stevens@open.ac.uk]

The Open University [http://www.open.ac.uk]

Abstract

The United Kingdom Open University has experimented with a range of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support learners and foster the development of learning communities, including online resources, email, e-messages, SMS messaging, and Second Life. The initial creation of information and resources to support study has been followed by the expansion of e-communications and interactive activities, which form part of a revitalised learner support blend, aimed at reducing the 'distance' in distance education for the learner. Here we describe how ICT has been used by two major learner support projects to strengthen student identity in the context of a programme of study, and to support students at key points in their learning journey.

Keywords

learner support, e-support, forum, community, subject-based support

Topics

Introduction

Distance is the problem with distance education in the United Kingdom. There is no huge appetite for distance teaching methods as such. Students choose the United Kingdom Open University (OU) primarily because it is the only, the most affordable or the most convenient mode of higher education available to them. We may use the attractive language of 'open learning', or 'flexible study', but many students hear the less appealing 'isolated learning', or' remote learning'. This is not surprising as most schooling and workplace training is social, usually group based, face-to-face, and led by a teacher or trainer.

There have been a number of attempts to establish a theory of independent learning. For Charles Wedemeyer (1981), distance education highlighted the independence of the student, separating the student from the teacher, with learning taking place in the student's own environment and the student taking responsibility for their own progress. For Börje Homberg (1995), there was even greater emphasis on the student's freedom of choice, working with the premise that

> Distance education is practised in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot – or do not want to – take part in classroom teaching.

Other theorists, though, stress that learning takes place in a social environment. For example, Etienne Wenger (2000) asserts that

> learning [...] is an interplay between social competence and personal experience. It is a dynamic, two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate.

And Rupert Wegerif (2007), states that 'education is about establishing relationships and [...] occurs always within the space of a relationship.'

In the past, the OU attempted to provide an equivalent through face-to-face tutorial support as part of its system of Supported Open learning. The term Supported Open Learning is used to describe the totality of the teaching, learning and administrative systems which support a distance student on their learning journey. It includes the course teaching materials, assessment strategy, correspondence tuition, face-to-face and other tutorial support, and information, advice and guidance.

However, there is a paradox at the heart of Supported Open Learning. It is designed for the distance learner, but from the outset the OU included a considerable amount of local face-to-face tutorial provision. Attendance was not compulsory and students could choose whether to attend any of the tutorials offered. Why provide expensive tutorial support as an optional element in a distance system? The answer was partly because students expected it, and partly because of fears that without this provision the drop-out rate would be unacceptably high. Students still want and value face-to-face tutorials, but attendance has been falling year on year, and is currently around 30% largely because of personal and work pressures on students' time.

Students want contact, but in ways that are convenient to them, so by embracing ICT, we are transforming

our ability to communicate and maintain relationships with our students at a distance. Widespread access to mobile telephones, computers and the internet for personal, social and employment purposes in the UK has meant that the OU can take advantage of a number of new channels of communication. And, with the advent of Web 2.0 tools, we are presented with even more possibilities for creating 'an architecture of participation' for our students (O'Reilly, 2005). Thus, as Janet Macdonald (2008) writes

> many faculties have adopted online media, and particularly forums, to provide an alternative means of tuition and support to learners. In some courses, forums are employed effectively as a replacement for face-to-face tutorials, with online activities forming an integral part of the course, either throughout, or at particular points in the course.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have had a significant impact on all aspects of teaching and student support. The OU is not an online university, but it has become a networked university in which students are linked to each other, their tutors and faculty, and to information, resources and services and where, as Manuel Castells (2002) states, 'the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks.'

On all but a handful of access courses regular access to computers and the internet is essential. As indicators of student engagement, by the end of 2009, 96% of students had provided the OU with their preferred e-mail address and 75% of tutor-marked assignments were submitted online. On most courses students can expect to spend at least a couple of sessions a week on computer-based activities, some of which are assessed, and much tutorial support is now provided through a mix of face-to-face tuition and online forums.

When students register for a course with the OU, they are given a log-on code enabling them to access their StudentHome page. StudentHome acts as a portal through which students can access course materials, the library and administrative information about the university. It also houses study support materials and resources, such as information on note-taking techniques, exam and revision planning, and time management tips. In essence, StudentHome acts as a gateway to the OU community; 150,000 students visit their StudentHome page each month.

E-Learner Support

The distance student need no longer be an isolated student; new modes of communication and dialogue are helping to create new types of learning communities.

Here we draw on two major OU student support projects - the Learner Support Framework and Personalised Integrated Learning Support– to illustrate the extensive application of ICT which, as part of a blended approach, makes effective use of all the available media to support student success.

The Learner Support Framework is designed to support students from registration on their first course to completion of studies. Analysis of student demographics and progress was used to identify critical points in the student journey where intervention might make a difference to retention and progression. The Framework defines a core support service built around key activity areas and combines proactive and reactive elements. Each key activity has defined objectives, associated main activities, service standards and delivery targets. While the Framework encompasses all students, it also contains specific measures for disadvantaged and disabled students. A blend of media are employed including telephone, print and some face to face workshops, but increasing use is made of online study support resources, email, e-messages and learner support forums.

In 2005, the OU secured funding of £2.5 million over five years from the Higher Education Funding Council for England to establish the Personalised Integrated Learning Support (PILS) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The main aim of the PILS CETL is to personalise and integrate student support within the context of subject pathways and programmes of study. One of the core objectives is to harness e-technologies to provide a model of coherent blended support and to that end, PILS has piloted a number of activities using a variety of different media. PILS works as an integrated team drawn from a wide range of university staff including full-time academic staff, associate lecturers (part-time tutors responsible for delivering our course modules), educational and careers advisers, and other support, marketing and administrative staff.

Tools to support students

Improving communication: E-messages

E-messages are brief communications sent to students' preferred email address at timely points during their studies. They provide information about general study issues and have links to other resources, personal advice available from OU staff, and to related forums. The current suite of messages cover: a welcome to study, initial study skills advice, a mid-course progress check, information about residential schools, support for exam revision, study planning and an end of course review.

E-messages help to address several issues. A printed student handbook may tell students everything they need to know but it is easily forgotten or lost. Students complain that they are drowning in information but aren't told what they need to know when they need to know it. The e-messages act as a convenient 'just in time' newsletter.

Most OU support materials are available online and students are encouraged to self serve but research has indicated that many are often unaware of the full range available. E-messages have been effective in signposting other support resources. Generic information and support cannot meet all individual needs and e-messages also serve to link students to the personal advice available from their tutor and other university advisory staff. This has been further reinforced by the introduction of learner support forums.

Strengthening support and community: Forums

In the OU forums have primarily been used in teaching but, quite apart from engagement in the course itself, forums can also provide a social space in which students can interact with others regardless of where they live; where they can work collaboratively, as well as help and support each other and engage in reflective thought (Macdonald, 2008). Exploring the potential of forums for student support is, therefore, a natural extension, both through the generic provision and within the context of a subject area or programme of study.

Between 2007 and 2009, a range of forums have been piloted: Welcome, Careers Advice, Study Skills,

Disability, Keeping Up with Study, Exam Revision and Study Planning. Students have also been invited to a forum which asked them to feed back their experiences of studying the Psychology degree to the programme director. Here we look at just two of the forums in more detail: Welcome and Study Planning.

(i). The Welcome 'getting started' forums were introduced to provide an orientation to study for new OU students. Up to 40% of students lack standard university entrance qualifications, others may have no recent study experience, and almost all are unfamiliar with the system of study. New students receive a Welcome booklet which introduces university study and signposts online induction, preparation and study skills resources. This is a useful but passive resource which offers no opportunity for interaction with other students or with the university. For the pilot, new students were invited to take part in 'getting started' forums during the six weeks before the start of the course. The main objectives of the forums were to:

- Support initial orientation and start building a relationship with students in order that they would have a clearer sense of the system of study, feel more confident and be better prepared to start their course.

- Enable students to ask questions about any aspect of their studies and receive information and advice from experienced staff.

- Reduce the sense of individual isolation and help create a sense of academic community.

The forums were moderated by three associate lecturers supported by an educational adviser. Just under 40% of those invited participated (3371 students, making 7300 visits and reading over 4000 messages). The main themes related to being new to the university and anxiety about starting study. Students' primary motivation in visiting the forum was to make contact with the university and with other students taking the same course or courses in the same subject area. Worries about study, prompted by the recent arrival of the course material, were commonplace:

> *My course materials arrived yesterday and like a lot of you it was a bit daunting, so much information! Its nice to see that there are others in the same boat though*

Students also had a great number of practical queries about course content and workload, managing time, preparation, tutorial support, assignments and study skills. The moderators were able to provide reassurance as well as practical advice. The forums appear to have offered a comfortable setting where new students could ask questions or own up to concerns. But perhaps the most important benefit was the early contact with other students and peer group support. A notable feature was the extent to which students supported each other with everything from tips about working with the virtual learning environment, to preparatory suggestions and strategies for balancing the demands of study with a new baby.

> *I had questions, which might sound stupid to others, but when I went on the forum, other students were in the same boat. Some of my questions were answered. I felt so relaxed when I introduced myself and answered another student's question. NO QUESTION IS STUPID and this getting started forum put all my fears to rest. Fantastic way of finding your way around*

(ii) The OU curriculum is modular and offers considerable freedom of choice. Students may seek advice on planning their studies from various sources including other students, their associate lecturer, advisory staff or the university website. However, around one in five students say that they do not have enough information about the order in which to study courses, so offering study planning forums meet an important need.

Study Planning forums were piloted for Psychology, History, Sociology and Social Policy, and are now being extended to other subject areas. The forums enabled students to discuss course choice, routes through a degree, postgraduate study, workload, and careers.

> *Just wondering if anyone has done [...Film and Television History] as it looks fantastic. I want to do it as one of my level 3 courses, but would love some feedback from someone who has completed it. How heavy was the course load and what was the exam like?*

Just under 4000 students visited the forums making 1200 postings over four weeks. Students completing an online feedback questionnaire said that they greatly valued the opportunity to 'meet up' with other students:

> *I was craving human contact with other OU history students during the 'off season :-)*

The chance to 'meet' and chat with others was evidently an attraction, which meant that some postings did move from discussions about the curriculum into the realm of social networking. One moderator discovered this posting on the 'Exploring History' Facebook group page:

> *Just a quick note to anyone who noticed the message on the OU student homepage. There is a student services forum for students doing history. I have had a quick look and it is brilliant. Loads of questions been asked. I have got a lot of info from it and I am sure you guys will get help from it too [...] Also lots of advice on history careers. I have been sent some links about becoming a history teacher. Just thought I would let you guys know about this. I am finding it really useful.*

Such interactions were, though, limited which does suggest that the majority of students engaged in the forums primarily for a reason. But what draws people to a particular community? Jenny Preece (2000) asserts that 'the reasons vary. Some want information or support, to interact with others, have fun, meet new people, or voice their own ideas.' But she also says that online communities have 'a shared *purpose*, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community.'

It is likely, then, that without a clear focus such communities would not exist at all (Cameron, Morgan and Williams 2009). It was possibly being able to raise a query with a member of OU staff or offer feedback to the Psychology programme director that initially brought students to the forums. But as students participate, it is apparent that a major attraction is being able to share interests, worries, and experiences with other students.

Strengthening subject identity: Websites

The student experience is enhanced by building communities of learners with shared interests which can, of course, be online – as Preece (2000) writes, 'online communities do enable meaningful communication

among people separated by distance, time, and, to some extent, culture.' To some extent, students do establish a sense of community with others around individual course modules, however, there are benefits in nurturing an overarching identity built around a subject area. In effect, the subject can provide a home in which students start to build their community based on shared interests.

The design and construction of subject websites has meant that OU students can access virtual 'homes' designed to replicate some of the places they might expect to see on a conventional university campus, for example, school offices, with photos and information about the academics who work here, and departmental notice boards, advertising events. The range of ICT-enabled support activities piloted includes:

- Video clips of students and associate lecturers at day schools and residential schools to bring aspects of the teaching and student experience to life. Some students are anxious about residential school attendance and the direct student voice has helped to offer reassurance.

- Podcasts to help students prepare and find out a little more about their subject area.

- Additional self-diagnostic and taster resources.

- Links to subject-based online careers, course choice and study skills conferences.

- Articles written by associate lecturers based on their own research interests - for example, the way chemical terms are misrepresented by advertising and the media, and an introductory overview of Transpersonal Psychology.

- Links to professional bodies, general news items or relevant television broadcasts and RSS feeds.

Although these subject homes offer students a range of information and resources, as members of the broad subject community they did not initially allow interaction, for students to engage directly with each other, or with the faculty staff. However discussion forums are enabling such communication to take place.

What have we learnt?

This is very much a report of work in progress. A great deal of pilot activity to enhance student support has taken place but the OU is a long way from knowing how to make best use of the range of ICT tools available or how to integrate e-support with direct personal contact, print, telephone and other media. And the pace of innovation shows no sign of slowing down.

However e-support is becoming part of the mainstream service. A suite of seven e-messages are now routinely sent to students preferred email address at key points during study. The messages are opened by around 60% of students (approximately 200,000 a year) and, on average, 30% click follow up links to further information or resources. Learner support forums for induction, course choice, study skills and revision are being built into the learner support framework as standard provision. Just over 15,000 students participated in learner support forums in 2008, and the numbers are set to double in 2009. There is now agreement and funding to implement subject level websites in all fourteen major OU subject areas.

E-support Benefits

Practical communication and support

The OU has reached a tipping point, with almost all students online, where it can begin to fully exploit the potential of ICT. Students expect that communication from the university will be online; for example, a recent survey showed that 88% of new students preferred e-mail for receiving information and advice from OU staff compared with the telephone (60%) and face-to-face (49%) (Open University, 2009). The majority of new students are comfortable with the technology because they use similar tools in daily life, and though computing help guides are available, new students taking part in the getting started forums found them easy to use without any special training.

E-support has significant cost advantages over printed materials. The design, delivery and updating costs of online resources and e-messages are modest compared with the print and postage costs of booklets and letters. Many student queries are straightforward and can be answered through email or forums. Forums, in particular make a cost-effective use of staff to offer information, advice and guidance to large numbers of students, freeing up time for essential one-to one advisory sessions with individual students.

Integrated support

The OU has had a reputation for overwhelming students with paper, and to make matters worse un-coordinated communications would come from different parts of the university. Pulling information, resources and support together online is helping to make for a more coherent study experience.

The division between subject specific and generic support resources is starting to break down, as students become seen as members of a subject area or qualification associated with a subject area. Some e-messages are being customised for individual courses, and getting started forums are being moderated by a combination of faculty academic staff and educational advisers. It is becoming easier to see what is being said to students and when, and to pace support activities alongside course teaching. Different forms of e-support are being integrated to reinforce each other, with e-messages acting as the communication channel which connects induction, study skills and other resources together with learner support forums and also providing links to advisory staff.

Support Networks and Community Building

One major drawback of the OU modular curriculum is that student identification is strong at the level of the course module, but weak at the level of the subject or programme. Students do not have the same sense of membership of the department or faculty found in some conventional universities. For example, there is no OU continuity of presence between one course module finishing and another starting and no communication to maintain a relationship with students who take a temporary break from study. The subject home websites are permanently available, even during a study break of a year or more and after graduation. Students have welcomed the subject websites and feedback indicates that they do enhance the sense of identity with the subject area and with the university. Since April 2008, over 100,000 thousand students have made around 175,000 visits to the websites.

> *I found the website very informative, easy to understand and to navigate. I liked that I gave detailed information about the background and interests of the course team members. It gave useful information about which degree you should aim for, such as BA or BSc. It gave me some ideas about which area of psychology I would like to pursue when completing my degree. It also gave some information about further studies such as MSc and PhD. I also liked reading the information about residential school, which has given me confidence to attend the residential school next year when doing DD303. I think it is good that you can view previous research covered by the course team members and that there are links to various websites that contain detailed information about previous research projects. This website will be useful to all students no matter what level you are at.*

The introduction of discussion and learner support forums is helping to create an important feedback loop between the student experience the university. The evident anxiety of new students has informed the revision of the induction programme, resulting in a new university-level website offering an online 'freshers week' equivalent and preparatory websites and forums for some courses. Study planning forums such as the History forum generated requests for information on specific course modules (new, planned, or discontinued), study pathways, and new developments within the curriculum, like the new MA in History, which in turn are feeding into prospectus information. The chance to talk to the Psychology programme director through a forum allowed students to offer feedback directly to the faculty. Forum moderators really felt a sense of community being fostered between and amongst students. One moderator recorded a video diary, in which she reflected:

> *One thing again I took away from today was that we've got an incredible amount of classics students. In my day job I don't talk to many Classical Studies students. There is a real sense of community amongst them* (Osborn, Stevens and Wheeler, 2008).

One of the underlying objectives of greater use of ICT was to reduce the 'loneliness of the long distance learner' and forums have demonstrated considerable potential. They aimed to create a place for students to talk openly about their studies, and some were actively looking for peer support to counter the isolation of distance study. There was much evidence to suggest that students found a mutually supportive environment in the forums, whether they were looking for some help with kick-starting their studies or some encouragement to keep themselves motivated:

> *Starting [Introduction to the Social Sciences] in Feb, haven't looked at materials yet, but excited. Hoping to get a few study buddies to keep me motivated*

> *Thank you for all your support and messages throughout [my assignment]. I am happy and still confused how I managed it. But THANK YOU, knowing that you were all out there kept me going.*

A notable feature of the forums was the extent to which students did support each other with reassurance and practical study tips. Several moderators commented on the supportive atmosphere and the 'good advice' students gave each other.

Concerns

Although using computers and the internet is an essential part of Open University study, we also know that, 'The use of computers, and particularly online study, presents challenges for students' (Macdonald, 2008). Without students having the necessary skills, or having the necessary equipment and internet connections, we are always in danger of only being able to reach those who can reach us.

The OU has established a Digital Divide project to address these issues. The first phase of the project included the provision of grants to buy computers, arranging access to computers in the community, a printed study booklet with information about ICT skills, advice and training, and an optional IT element added to OU access courses. The second phase involves further research to identify and help students overcome barriers. But there is a group who are excluded, namely those who don't want to study online and would prefer face-to-face contact to web based resources, messages and forums.

There is a risk of overloading students with a different media. The OU has always been a multimedia university but the relatively simple world of self-contained printed course material augmented by television, radio and group tutorials has become infinitely more diverse and probably more confusing as students attempt to juggle the variety of printed materials, online library resources, DVDs, websites, messages, forums and other activities.

Each new ICT application involves an additional investment of time by students and staff who are probably more interested in subject content than some new facet of the virtual learning environment. Moderating forums, for example, is a distinctive skill which is honed through practice. Some of our moderators completed an internal training course, but it's fair to say that many are still learning by experience. And though it is difficult to admit it, students who are digital natives may be more comfortable with ICT than some staff who never did 'get' blogs, wikis, Facebook or Twitter.

Conclusion: What Next

Much of the work described here has fed into a major Open University review of student support. The core recommendations, now being progressed, involve a clear shift to supporting students in the context of a programme of study by means of an integrated student support team. Seven large scale pilots have been established to test out new models of support. Central to the pilots is the further exploitation of online technologies to complement personal support. This will include a student profile system to bring together information provided by students, course and qualification registration, academic performance, and online tracking data. The student profile will be used to drive proactive communications from the university, to support personal contact, and structure the personalisation of the university's online presence.

We are convinced that there is an important role for e-support within an overall learner support strategy but cannot yet offer a comprehensive model. There is still much to learn about the range of media and tools available and how to use them to best affect. The OU has recently adopted Elluminate, an online an online communication and collaboration tool that enables teaching staff to run live interactive lectures and seminars. It also has a presence on Facebook and Twitter, and has launched its own channel on YouTube. Some OU associate lecturers have recorded YouTube videos to introduce themselves to students, and use Facebook and Skype as a formal part of tutorial support. Students are also independently experimenting

with a range of social networking tools.

While the use of e-technologies presents students with more and more opportunities to interact with each other, and build networks and communities, there remains the challenge of engaging with those who don't possess the skills. So, although we embrace a new 'architecture for participation' the university must always strive to create the most inclusive environment for students.

References

[1] Cameron, B.A., Morgan, K., and Williams, K.C. (2009). Group Projects: Student Perceptions of the Relationship Between Social Tasks and a Sense of Community in Online Group Work. The American Journal of Distance Education, 23, 20-33.

[2] Castells, M. (2000). The Rise of the Network Society. Oxford: Blackwell.

[3] Clark, N. (2001). Education, Communication, and Consumption: Piping in the Academic Community. In C. Werny and M. Mowbray (Ed.), Online Communities (pp. 129 – 151). New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

[4] Green, L. and Kaye, H. (2008). Draft Report for the PILS/CETL Team meeting: An analysis of comments posted on the Online Forum for Psychology students. OU internal report.

[5] Homberg, B. (1995). Theory and Practice of Distance Education. London: Routledge.

[6] Jewitt, K. (2009). Getting Started Forums: Social Science and Business. OU internal report.

[7] Kelly, L. (2009). Online Getting Started Forums: Executive Summary. OU internal report.

[8] Macdonald, J. (2008). Blended Learning and Online Tutoring: Planning Learner Support and Activity Design. Aldershot: Gower Publishing.

[9] The Open University. (2009). Early Course Experience Survey 2009: Key Findings Report, Institute of Educational Technology. OU internal report.

[10] O'Reilly, T. (2004) The Architecture of Participation. Retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/articles/architecture_of_participation.html

[11] Osborn, J. Stevens, C. and Wheeler, J. (2009). PILS Course Choice Forums October – November 2008. OU internal reports.

[12] Personalised Integrated Learning Support. (2005). Retrieved April 22, 2009, from http://www.open.ac.uk/pils

[13] Preece, J. (2000). Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability. Chichester: John Wiley.

[14] Supporting Student Progression Theory: Context: Practice (2009). OU internal booklet.

[15] Tawse, I. (2007). The 2007 PILS (Personalised Integrated Learning Support) Psychology Course Choice Forum: A Report. OU internal reports.

[16] Wedemeyer, C. (1981). Learning at the backdoor. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

[17] Wegerif, R. (2007). Dialogic Education and Technology: Expanding the Space of Learning. New York: Springer.

[18] Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems. Organization, 7, 225-246. Retrieved November 27, 2009, from http://sporg.highwire.org/cgi/reprint/7/2/225

Acknowledgements