Professional Development for Distance Tutors in Distance and Campus Based universities

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the environment and roles for distance tutors in the Open University (UK) and the University of Leicester together with the initiatives which are already underway in order to provide professional development within our respective institutions.

Keywords

Tutors, professional development, distance education

INTRODUCTION

The PROWE project involves tutors who are working in two very different environments. Both the Open University (UK) and University of Leicester have extensive distance education programmes and a significant community of part-time teaching staff. However there are many differences between the two institutions. University of Leicester is an on-campus research-led university with a very significant post graduate distance and e-learning programme mainly using a commercial VLE. On the other hand, the Open University (UK) is a distance university with an extensive UK regional and worldwide presence, operating at scale. These differences and similarities influence the roles of distance tutors and the approaches to professional development which are relevant and feasible.

DISTANCE TUTORS AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY (UK)

The Open University (UK) employs 8000 part-time tutors, who act as the human interface between the university and its students. Each tutor is responsible for the support of a group of around 20 students, although the group may vary in size depending on the geographical distribution of students. While some staff work for the University part-time and provide support to one group on one course, others have a portfolio of courses, and effectively work full time. Their role is to deal with students as identifiable individuals, marking assignments with detailed formative feedback, and providing support to students as appropriate. Tutors are not concerned with the delivery of content, since that is provided in printed or web based course materials. The nature of their support will vary to some extent with the Faculty and course, and some online courses run with low tutor input, but broadly speaking there is a standard remit.

Tutors are distributed throughout the UK, traditionally with responsibility for students who live locally, although this varies for low population courses. They work from home, and rarely have the opportunity to meet fellow tutors on the course which they tutor, or indeed to meet the course writers who have designed the course and its assessment strategy. We know that they frequently have a variety of other work-related experiences they bring to the job. They might be working full-time in other institutions, or perhaps have a portfolio career. It is likely that these varied backgrounds and motivations will influence tutors' needs for staff development in addition to their attitudes to drivers such as accreditation, job satisfaction or the enhanced ability to support students effectively (Tait, 2002).

Professional development initiatives

Professional development for our part-time tutors focuses on improving and extending their professional knowledge and skills as supporters of student learning. There are additional requirements on professional development, because of the use of online media. Since 2004, all tutors are required to have access to the internet for administrative purposes, but also increasingly for learner support. Each tutor has a personalised home page, called *Tutor Home*, which gives them access to their student details, and to news and other web based resources, including the Library.

Tutors are also given an account on FirstClass, the Open University conferencing system, which provides them with an official University email to use for any communication with students or the University, as well as access to a wide range of computer conferences for keeping in touch with both students and fellow staff. From 2007, tutors will be expected to use the electronic submission system for most courses, and are increasingly expected to make use of computer conferencing, whether as an adjunct to other forms of support, or as the primary means of learner support to their student group.

Since the end of 2004, there has been a mandatory two year induction programme for tutors and an allowance within the contract for up to two days per year of continuing development activities for those who are more experienced. The responsibility for professional development for tutors is shared among a variety of units within the University. At the outset of a new course, Faculties provide induction into course concepts and approaches to learner support through an initial compulsory course briefing, which is normally conducted in a day's workshop. Opportunities for more generic professional development, and some Faculty associated briefings are provided through optional, primarily face to face seminars and workshops organized by staff in the University's thirteen geographical regions, supplemented by some workshops at national level. For those unable to attend workshops, or for ongoing staff development needs, the University has a range of distance learning materials, which are both paper and web based. In addition, a 60 pt postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is to be introduced in November 2006.

The Library also contributes to the professional development of tutors by delivering information literacy skills training and web-based resources, including a wide range of electronic journals and books. Tutors are encouraged to sign up for the MOSAIC U120 online literacy course and reflect on the learning. An online diagnostic tool has been developed to help tutors and others identify their strengths and weaknesses in information literacy and direct them to appropriate sources to improve their skills. Face to face training sessions are available as well as an online information literacy toolkit and supporting FirstClass conference. To help tutors find relevant sources quickly, the Library website has a dedicated page of services and web-based resources, including a personal customizable library page of course resources, which is available to tutors and students on some 54 OU courses. In June 2005, the Library, in partnership with the Institute of Educational Technology and the University of Leicester Beyond Distance Research Alliance, took the lead on a JISC funded project, PROWE, to investigate the potential of new online collaborative tools, such as wikis and blogs, and personal repositories for sharing ideas and information in a community of tutors (Hewling A., 2006).

At the OU in Scotland, where we cater for over 600 tutors, we have been delivering professional development by integrating hands-on workshops and online peer support through a team known as SOS (*Scottish Online Support*). SOS presently includes seven tutors with experience of using online for supporting students, recruited from Arts, Health and Social Care, Maths, Science, and Technology Faculties. Recognizing that some tutors need the confidence which is derived from help at their elbow, the team have run a series of 20 hands-on workshops to which nearly 400 tutors have attended. We recognise that tutors need to be competent in the use of the basic tools, before they are ready to discuss ways of using online media to support students, therefore we encourage tutors to return to our workshops at regular intervals: many appreciate the space to practise techniques in a supportive environment. Our support does not stop there: for new tutors it is extended into the home. They are asked to contact the workshop leader on reaching home, to confirm they have successfully tried out the new techniques from their home computer. If we do not hear from them, we ring them up.

As part of the SOS initiative we have developed a three week online course called *Tutor Moderators*, which provides an experiential approach to moderating. This course aims to develop tutors' ability to support students using FirstClass conferencing as part of a blended strategy of learner support. The course explores a range of models of conferencing, and the consequences for student participation and moderator roles, so it is aimed at tutors on courses where conferencing might not necessarily be integral to the course throughout the presentation, as well as those which are fully online. The greater part of the course is devoted to learning through interactions with fellow tutors; a moderator orchestrates the discussion and models good practice in moderating for fellow tutors.

The course lasts for three weeks, during which time participants are expected to spend approximately three hours per week, and to log in several times in each week, although they have some flexibility about the time within each week when they participate. To encourage reflection on the course objectives, and also in planning the time commitment, we encourage participants to complete a learning contract at the start of the course, and we issue a certificate of course completion to all students who have completed a minimum of three out of five activities in each week: they are asked to keep a record of their involvement. Any participants who do not complete are invited to join subsequent presentations. Demand for the course is brisk, and over a hundred tutors

from all Faculties are now qualified Tutor Moderators. We are now working with other user groups within the University on the options for its wider use, and the course is run from three of the University Regions.

Finally, for the past three years SOS have run the *SOS conference* for tutors, as an online forum for discussion on the use of online media for supporting students. Our evaluation of this long running conference, and the characteristics of those who participate, is described in a later paper in this seminar.

DISTANCE TUTORS AT LEICESTER UNIVERSITY

Postgraduates account for over half of the University of Leicester's students and roughly two thirds of them are distance learners, many of them living overseas. This makes Leicester the second biggest provider of postgraduate distance learning in the UK, with 6500 students. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the further development of distance learning has been identified as a strategic priority for the University, resulting in the appointment of the Director of DL Administration and the Professor of E-learning in late 2004.

The development of distance learning programmes at Leicester has largely been a response to the professional development needs of various sectors, and this has led to courses in a range of largely CPD related courses, from Management to Museum Studies. Within individual departments, processes and systems have evolved over time to meet a variety of needs, resulting in slightly different approaches in each. There are differences, for example, in such matters as the scale and remit, and even the name, of both tutors and the local agents who provide learning support and sometimes marketing in different countries. By and large, while full time Leicester based staff are responsible for the content delivery of distance learning, and live within commuting distance of the campus, our part time tutors are responsible for face-to-face teaching and first-marking of assignments, and may live anywhere.

Professional development initiatives

Much of the current support for tutors has focused on ensuring the consistency and quality of their marking and feedback. Whilst broader support is available from the Staff Development Centre, the take-up has been limited. In order to address this situation a number of programmes – including the Centre's Academic Practice award – are being developed to meet the needs of tutors.

The University has been working for over a year to develop its *Teaching Enhancement Forum*. This Forum builds on a number of initiatives to bring together those interested in the development of pedagogy and the enhancement of student learning, with the aim of generating change and informing strategy within the institution. To achieve this, the Forum seeks to engage colleagues across the institution including academics, students and learning support staff. It aims to be different from all other provision within the institution by its generative and innovative nature. It is anticipated that this Forum will consist of a variety of activities – projects, presentations, discussions and other events, identified by the Forum members, both using face-to-face and virtual communities. We anticipate that the virtual communities will be of particular interest to our distance learning tutors.

When the University of Leicester embarked on the implementation of Blackboard – the virtual learning environment (VLE) adopted in May 2002, staff development in this area had been at best piecemeal. Early attempts to engage staff in such communications involved adapting tasks that had previously been used in face to face workshops, to an e-learning environment. One of the earliest (and most revealing) became known as 'Virtual Lego' and adapting a much-used management training exercise developed by NASA: - 'Stranded in the desert'. Such early experimentation (Winter 2002/3) confirmed that if the implementation was to progress as rapidly as hoped, simply providing technical support for implementation was insufficient. It was essential to provide a framework for such engagement.

The e-Reflections framework, was designed to introduce colleagues to collaborative online group-work and provide them with a framework for the introduction of e-learning on their own courses, drawing on Salmon's 5 stage model of networked learning. The objective of this five-week, online course is to enable participants to explore the knowledge and skills involved in online tutoring and to provide an opportunity to explore the technical and pedagogic issues of e-learning. An essential part of the course is to involve participants in using e-learning media – discussion groups, virtual classroom sessions (or chats) and web materials – whilst exploring these issues and experiencing the medium from a student's perspective. Participants are encouraged to reflect on both the materials provided on e-learning and on the model of course design. This is achieved through communicating with other participants working in a wide range of contexts at the University of Leicester and beyond. From the outset e-Reflections was intended to be as relevant to those introducing an element of e-learning to a 'traditional' course as for those who support distance-learners.

The flexibility of the medium enabled the Staff Development Centre to contemplate this new provision at a time when its workload was already expanding rapidly. Whilst the course involved a total staff workload similar to a 2-day course delivered face-to-face, the allocation of that time was clearly more flexible. It was also recognised at an early stage that e-Reflections could be a valuable source of data for research. While statistics can only provide a crude measure of the level of engagement with a course, the heavy use of the discussion boards indicates strong interest. Early indications from qualitative feedback are that the course can make a significant contribution to the increasing pedagogical richness necessary to achieve wider integration of e-learning into the curricula of the University. Participants clearly see the course as providing both the skills necessary to become more effective online tutors and a model they can adapt to meet the needs of their students.

A further development of this framework was its inclusion in University of Leicester's *Post-Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice* (assessed at M-level). This continues to be the University's programme for staff new to teaching in HE, although it is increasingly being used as a means of continuing professional development by more experienced staff. This led to the extension of the course to Diploma and Masters alongside the creation of a distance-learning route from February 2006. The structured reflections made by the participants and their 'stories' will provide data for further research into the role of e-learning into the transformation of teaching and learning. Both the e-Reflections framework and the Academic Practice award utilising it have generated online communities of practice of varying duration. It is hope that these will support and develop the work of the Teaching Enhancement Forum.

The University is also in the process of developing its *SID - 'Staff Induction & Development'* - VLE resource. This is designed to to make induction easier (and more interesting) for new staff and to help existing staff update. Through SID staff can access resources on a range of topics on the web. The multimedia resources created typically take 15 minutes to complete and include an introduction to the subject, practical examples of how to implement best practice, University policies and interactive exercises to help check understanding. The availability of such resources has already transformed the face-to-face induction session for new staff and it is hoped they will be of particular value for the induction of associate lecturers.

CONCLUSIONS

So often in academic conferences such as this one, we discuss "students" or "tutors" without a common understanding of what such terms might mean in different institutional environments. The two cases described here illustrate how very different the roles of a tutor may be. The level of course, and type of student which they support will influence the nature of the job which they do. So for example, at Leicester the distance tutors are primarily concerned with the CPD market, whereas in the Open University distance tutors cover the whole range of Faculties and courses at all levels. While at the Open University there is some uniformity in the role of a tutor, this is not the case at Leicester. All these conditions will influence the type of professional development which is appropriate to their needs, and the scaleability of any provision across departments and Faculties.

At the same time, tutors at both Universities live at some distance from the campus, and therefore distance technologies have significant potential for networking opportunities and professional development. We are optimistic about the potential for blogs and wikis through the PROWE project, in both camps.

REFERENCES
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PROWE (Personal Repositories in an Online WIKI Environment) Project http://www.prowe.ac.uk

University of Leicester Beyond Distance Research Alliance http://www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance/