

BRIDGING INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES – INTEGRATING AND MENTORING TEACHING ROLES IN AN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In many educational institutions worldwide, online student numbers have grown steadily and changing student expectations have emerged. One impact has been that staff workloads have increased and diversified. Researchers and online teaching practitioners at USQ have acknowledged that high quality online teaching is time and labour intensive. A critical principle of USQ online pedagogy is that the “human” touch must be created and maintained throughout the learning experience and students should feel they are members of a facilitated, interactive learning community. To maintain a high quality level of interaction as student numbers have increased, there has been a need to draw on additional educators to teach the online courses. The Department of Further Education and Training within the Faculty of Education at USQ has had to look beyond the finite pool of on-campus staff and integrate tutors from both national and international arenas with on-site educators. This paper reflects on the experiences in the Department in terms of employing external online tutors, the organisational and administrative structures that have been put in place, and the mentoring, modelling and evaluative processes that have been engaged to ensure a strong working partnership between the organisation, course leader, and the online tutors. The paper refers to documentation that has been developed including a “Tutor Manual” and provides some recommendations when considering the implementation of similar systems and processes.

Keywords

Mentoring, online learning, international tutors, tertiary environment, peer-learning partnership

Introduction

Many educational institutions have responded to emerging information and communication technologies by adopting online education and training. Student cohorts are making demands on universities for

greater flexibility in the way they can access programs and services. The constant pace of change and the growth of information mean that people can no longer rely on their initial educational preparation to see them through their working lives. Because there is an ongoing need for education and training, institutions are faced with a variety of learners requiring access to flexible education.

Tertiary institutions today have access to information and communication technologies, creating new learning and teaching opportunities, and challenges to existing practice. Laurillard (2002) argues that universities must adapt to this change and become leaders in the application of technologies as learning tools and adopt strategies that facilitate active learning. This challenges the conventional approach where the teacher has the role of an expert delivering knowledge to the learner.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia has attempted to meet this challenge by expanding its provision of flexible learning opportunities and introducing online education in 1997. Two of the authors of this paper have been designing for, and teaching online for some years, particularly in the postgraduate, education arena. They have worked collaboratively on the design and teaching of online courses and this work has enabled them to reflect on the teaching and learning strategies implemented by referring to student feedback, personal teaching experience, and current literature in the field. In addition, these authors have recently been involved in a major research project (EIP - Evaluations and Investigation Program) funded by the Australian Government organisation of Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The EIP project (Postle, Sturman, Cronk, Mangubhai, Carmichael, McDonald, Reushle, Richardson, & Vickery, 2003) has been used to report on quantitative and qualitative data that were collected to develop an understanding of the nature and extent of key issues affecting the adoption of totally online approaches at USQ. A qualitative analysis of staff and student surveys and a quantitative analysis of the course statistics available through the BlackBoard platform have been conducted and critical issues and dilemmas identified. In addition, an analysis of the responses to questionnaires sent to experienced online users has been performed. In this paper, some of those issues, and means of addressing those issues, are discussed. As noted by a survey respondent in the EIP research project into online teaching and learning,

Course leaders have the opportunity with the online environment to adapt, modify and change whole sections of the course, or ways previously planned to proceed, to engage with content, to assess – according to the students' needs, interests, expectations, contexts and prior learning, so long as the Course Specification (objectives, etc.) continue to be met. Online means being able to truly take account of what students want, re-shaping the environment to make the most of students' collective experience and expertise, mobilising them to construct knowledge for their own purposes.

However, this increased demand for interactivity and negotiation between teacher/student and student/student has had an impact on the role of the online teacher.

Changing Roles for Teachers in an Online Environment

In 1998, McCann, Christmass, Nichololson, & Stuparich proposed that Internet delivery would allow Australian universities to compete cost effectively in the world market, thus enhancing Australia's world leadership status in terms of innovation in distance education. The study (1998, p. vi) noted that the use of information technology can mean significant savings in resources with a shift from physical to virtual resources (lecture halls and libraries to online services) and with a shift in the relative allocation of resources for course development and for teaching.

In addition, in a previous EIP report, King (2001, p. 48) refers to a comment made by Michael Dolence who envisages educators becoming managers of educational delivery. This suggestion heralds extreme change to existing practices. Dolence suggests that, a significant number of our academic staff should stop teaching and marking, and become managers of educational delivery, including the training and supervision of sub-contracted staff, perhaps from other countries who can do these things - that is an absolutely essential component of any scaleable approach to e-business in universities. Academics should authenticate the content of courses and manage quality assurance processes but not be responsible for delivering those courses intended for mass overseas markets.

However, many leading scholars in the field of online learning challenge this “commercial” approach to education. Laurillard (2002, p. 22) argues for the idea of a “conversational framework” for learning which she believes captures the essence of university teaching as an “iterative dialogue between teacher and student(s)”. She proposes that technology can be used to engage students by exploiting “the communicative, interactive, and adaptive capabilities of the technology” to facilitate this iterative dialogue.

Laurillard’s (2002) proposal raises the issue of cost effectiveness in online delivery. Highly interactive online discussion groups require low teacher/learner ratios, creating a high staffing cost for the university. The University of Phoenix, which targets working adults, has a teaching and learning model that puts a great value on small class size and stipulates that class participation is mandatory. Interaction is conducted asynchronously, through threaded discussions, that place a high emphasis on learner participation and interaction. For online classes, the University recognises that facilitating class discussions requires a high level of faculty involvement, and classes are typically kept to about nine students per class. The university covers the additional faculty cost by charging more for online courses than campus courses. The course completion rate is 97% and graduation rate is 65% (De Alva & Slobodzain, 2001). Hence the tension arises between cost effectiveness and quality online learning experiences.

Learner-centred and Learning Centred

Mayes (2001, p. 17) has observed that never before has there been so much agreement about the pedagogical fundamentals of teaching and learning. He observes that the shared theoretical assumptions are those of constructivism, and they result from two distinct shifts of emphasis - shift from a representational view of learning to a constructivist or constructionist view where learning is primarily developed through activity... Second shift is away from the focus on the individual, towards a new emphasis on social contexts for learning.

This approach favours instructional methods that use a constructivist approach to teaching and learning, with a focus on dialogue, learning partnerships, and the joint construction of knowledge. This approach is used for the design of many of the online courses at USQ, and is particularly evident in the use of discussion forums to facilitate online interaction. In the EIP project, respondents to the staff survey stated that the adoption of online approaches to teaching and learning provides a number of advantages over traditional distance education. One of the most significant points discussed was the increased opportunity for interaction, particularly between teacher and student, and between students, both synchronously and asynchronously. Students enquiring about the quality of online education offered at USQ have indicated that one of the most important factors in choosing between online universities is the quality of instruction, student support and level of interaction available with the online teacher. The synchronous and asynchronous tools (discussion groups, email, and virtual chats) provide environments for collaborative group learning, where learners can actively exchange ideas and co-construct their knowledge within the context of an online learning community (Wenger, 1998).

The fact that online education brings with it increased opportunities for interaction implies increased levels of participation on the parts of both the teacher and learner. Again, this raises the issue of workloads and sustainability. To illustrate levels of interaction, data collected for the EIP project for a particular online course recorded that, over a period of one semester (15 weeks’ duration), the teacher accessed the discussion board 485 times, posted 485 messages, sent 104 emails (through the BlackBoard system, others were not logged) posted 62 announcements, created/modified a group 9 times, accessed the Gradebook 35 times and the Digital DropBox 202 times. This gave a total of over one thousand hits by the teacher on the BlackBoard platform for the semester. Emails responding to personal (direct) student emails were not logged on the Blackboard system. This level of interaction raises the question, is this level of teacher participation sustainable? What might need to be done to ensure that teachers can cope in this environment and what is a suitable workload for one online teacher? How might the need for reasonable learner/teacher ratios be met in a cost effective way?

Responding to Learner Expectations

In online courses offered by USQ, there is more of an emphasis on the use of asynchronous communication enabling students to log on at any time and read and post messages to the discussion forum. This continuous access has changed learner expectations and created altered demands on teacher

time. A recent study conducted by Cashion and Palmieri (2002) also identified a range of key features which students believe constitute a high-quality online learning experience. One of the features identified by the research was the importance of *responsive teachers* who exhibited high levels of interactivity, availability, and who negotiated response times which they subsequently adhered to. As reported in an ANTA (2002, p. 6) research report, “An important success factor in online learning is developing rapport with the students: knowing them, their progress and their interests intimately to help to enrich their learning experiences as much as possible”.

Respondents to the teacher survey in the EIP study expressed concern that student access has become linked to demands for courses to be “serviced” seven days a week, 24 hours a day. The issues surrounding “student expectations” raise some complex questions that link to the concepts of “power and control” in online environments. The increased levels and quality of interaction have meant students have the potential to access staff any time of the day, and at any point in the course. This level of access is different from the “traditional” print-based distance education learner/teacher interaction, where learners received a learning package and basically studied in an independent learning mode. Interaction was often restricted to a telephone tutorial, maybe a residential school and written feedback on assessment items.

A respondent to the EIP staff (teaching) survey flagged a common concern which emerged in this research,

at the moment I am trying to discover strategies that will enable me to work with much larger groups of online students as there does not seem to be any quota imposed on online enrolments, numbers for my course are growing each semester, availability of tutors with the necessary knowledge, expertise and skill to teach are not easily forthcoming, and I recognise I need to find other ways of addressing this issue of response to student interaction. This may mean I will need to adapt my own teaching philosophy to accommodate the restrictions imposed by larger numbers of learners. This may mean less personal contact and less interaction.

Integrating and Mentoring Teaching Roles

Therein lies a dilemma – the tension between economic efficiency and perceived sound, online pedagogy. One solution to reducing the variable costs of online delivery is offered through a “differentiated staffing model” which we believe goes some of the way towards addressing the issue of balancing high quality online learning interactions with sustainable teaching workloads. A differential staffing model has been trialled in the Department of Further Education and Training (FET) at USQ for online “classes” of more than twenty-five students. This model has the course leader assuming the lead role in a course and “mentoring” a number of online tutors who maintain facilitation roles. Experience in this Department suggests that a highly interactive discussion group should have a ratio of ten students to one moderator, while one teacher could successfully manage a less interactive group of 25-30 students. However, rather than using personnel who may have limited content background and little or no online teaching and learning experience, the Department has looked beyond the pool of on-campus teaching staff and employed a number of tutors outside the institution from both national and international arenas.

It is evident from a growing body of literature (McDonald & Reushle, 2002; Jacobsen, 2002; Laurillard, 2002) that well-designed support and resources are required in order to guide teachers, both experienced and novice, through technological and pedagogical preparation. Personal experience of the authors, informed by reflection on the literature, has guided the design and development of a number of support strategies for the tutors, including:

- modelling the process of building “social presence” in an online environment;
- provision of model feedback and responses to student queries;
- regular online interaction between the teachers and the tutors, both asynchronous and synchronous;
- timely responses, by teachers and administrators, to tutor queries;
- provision of detailed assessment marking criteria; and
- ongoing moderation of assessment feedback and grades.

The following have formed the core resources for the mentoring of the online national and international tutors in the Department:

- the “master” teacher;
- a *Manual for Tutors/Course Examiners of Online Studies* (Reushle et al., 2002) located on a secure website. This Manual is discussed in further detail below.
- an online education and training program for teachers. The program aims to provide learners (in this case, the academic staff) with first-hand experience of their roles and responsibilities as online teachers and administrators by immersing them in the teaching/learning environment (that is, the BlackBoard learning management system).
- staff development papers, available from the Tutor Manual website. The papers address topics such as, “Using Discussion Forums Effectively”; and “Teaching in USQOnline”.

Tutor Manual

The *Manual for Course Examiners/Tutors of Online Studies* has been developed drawing on the experience of practitioners teaching online for the Department of FET, ideas presented in the current literature (Salmon, 2002; Higgison, 2000; Duggleby, 2000; Joliffe, Ritter, & Stevens, 2001), USQ policies and procedures, and feedback from a variety of sources including course leaders, tutors and program administrators. The Manual is provided to all online tutors and teachers (via a secure website) and is updated on a regular basis. The *Manual* provides guidelines in areas such as:

- expectations of a tutor in terms of qualifications, work experience, teaching within the USQ context, and duty specifications (e.g. time allocations to particular tasks);
- quality assurance procedures, including evaluative strategies;
- strategies for facilitating online discussion;
- model feedback;
- ethics statements for students and staff explaining the application of university policy documents and netiquette expectations; and
- assessment guidelines and moderation procedures.

The evaluation process outlined in the Manual includes gathering data at the end of semester using a formal, documented review process. Course leaders and tutors prepare ongoing reflective journals and self-evaluation reports to be submitted to the program coordinator. An informal dialogue is also conducted between course leaders, tutors, instructional designers and interested colleagues throughout the semester. The *Manual* is currently under review by Senior Management at the University and, once finalised, will be adopted as a university-wide document.

The Mentoring Process in FET

The process of mentoring in the Department of FET online context involves someone (the mentor) having a significant beneficial effect on the professional development of another individual, generally as a result of personal one-on-one contact. Traditionally, mentoring has been used to assist promising junior executives climb the career ladder. However, in this case, the process is used by experienced online teachers to support the new tutors who are working in USQ online teaching contexts for the first time. The Department of FET strongly believes that the mentoring of online tutors contributes to the recruitment, development and retention of a diverse and innovative online workforce (Clutterbuck & Ragins, 2001). Teachers and tutors have adopted a peer-learning partnership role (Eisen, 2001). This relationship has been considered more appropriate than the traditional mentor-protégé relationship which is often perceived as hierarchical and, as Shapiro et al. (1978, cited by Eisen, 2001) indicates, tends to foster a power imbalance and a one-way flow of information from the mentor to the novice. Such an arrangement, Eisen (2001) notes, is not suitable for groups of professionals as it fails to affirm and tap into the expertise individuals have already developed. Tutors are selected by the Department according to their recognised domain expertise and interest in the online environment.

Conclusion

The adoption of online technologies at USQ has meant that teachers are experiencing change in terms of their teaching philosophies, their relationships with learners, and their work patterns and activities. Teachers at USQ have developed considerable insights into how to use online technologies in order to strengthen the concept of a learning community. Many of these teachers’ roles are changing from being the “experts” in their field to being facilitators of learning. In many cases, they are also combining this

role with others that define them as learning partners, learning managers and often “master” teachers or mentors working with a diverse team of other teaching professionals.

Initial evaluative feedback from “apprentice” tutors supports the mentoring or peer learning processes currently being trialled at USQ. Tutors have reported their satisfaction with the Tutor Manual, particularly for providing information on policy and procedure. They have indicated their approval of the modelling, by “master” teachers, of “expected interaction online”, and the effectiveness of their preparation to assume a more active and autonomous role in the courses in which they teach. The peer learning relationship model has been well received by tutors. A tutor noted that having her opinions and contributions “respected” and her suggestions for modifications to courses not only considered, but often implemented, contributed to a motivating, “supportive environment”. There remains, however, much room for further evaluation and research possibilities. Will the use of a diverse pool of international tutors pose a threat to existing “on-site” teachers? Given the diverse student body, does the use of both Australian and international teaching personnel represent a strength of the course offerings? Are there more cost effective and efficient ways of preparing and supporting online teachers and tutors? Investigations into the “differentiated staffing models” for online teaching and learning are certainly in the early stages and require a great deal of further exploration.

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