Management of e-learners: some implications for practitioners

Gurmak Singh
Wolverhampton Business School

Background and Rationale

Information technologies have played a leading role in supporting many recent changes in teaching and learning approaches in Higher Education. Contemporary innovation finds information technology (IT) at the heart of Higher Education transformation. The opportunities afforded by these learning technologies are well documented in popular academic literature. They point to new applications of the latest communication technologies. However, they also bring with them a host of new questions and challenges. The management of e-learners is likely to be part of a more far-reaching organisational change. Where learning technologies are introduced, a layer of technical complexity is added. The redesign of business processes and structures is far from simple 'technical' matter. It involves significant social redesign. The extent to which enabling technology has driven the shift towards learner-centred learning in all educational contexts is a matter of debate. As the century turns, establishing the acceptance, let alone the effectiveness and quality of technology-mediated learning, is still seriously problematic (Salmon, 1999). However, the suitability of information and communication technology (ICT) as a means of encouraging self-directed learning is not in doubt, nor that the role of the tutor is changing to 'guide on the side': a facilitator not transmitter, of information (Marchmont, 2000). This paper reports findings of a single case study at Wolverhampton Business School. Qualitative data was collected through structured and unstructured interviews with learners and tutors on Business Administration Award. A total of 20 learners and 5 tutors form the basis of the findings.

The Research

The Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF) is a purpose built computer based virtual learning environment developed by the University of Wolverhampton. Through close consultation between academic staff and developers, an integrated system has evolved which enables learners to access course notes, related resources, support materials and collaborative tools quickly and easily.

The WOLF system uses streamed Internet based technology to bring together a wide range of powerful tools to create a multi-structured aid to learning. One copy of all learning material and associated resources is stored centrally and streamed to any user with access to the Internet, on demand. The key feature here, apart from being available when needed by the user, is the simplicity in updating and amending material, given only one copy is kept. Freeing lecturers from their previous paper chase ensures that all learners on the course have the 'correct' learning and assessment materials. Lecturers are free to keep improving the learning environment and adding to the learning materials. It is based on the simple acceptance of "Anytime, Anywhere Study". The development of content involves no programming (HTML etc.), which means that lecturers can update their material themselves or submit it electronically to a course administrator.

Profile of Respondents

The respondents were predominantly mature learners: 7 male and 14 females with an average age of 26. They came from a variety of disciplines and possessed a range of educational qualifications. All were studying part-time and most had been with their organisations for just over three years. All had received training of using the on-line system. The study was undertaken in autumn semester 1999 with part-time learners in their final year Business Administration Award.

Provide a social learning environment

There is a need to develop trust between tutor and the learner early on in the programme. Learners welcomed the early face-to-face meeting to begin the social development process. However, although some social development and reinforcement did occur online, tutors suggested that it was often necessary to use off-line communications. This was more evident when learners did not attend the ''study days'. In addition, tutors felt it was difficult to provide disappointing feedback online, as learners need to be encouraged and supported through face-to-face interaction or through the use of telephone.

The learners reported some tutors' lack of enthusiasm or optimism through on-line communication especially where they (learners) had not met their tutor face-to-face. In extreme cases tutors had failed to respond to learner's enquiries through the online system. The intermittent and unpredictable communication can hinder the relationship between the tutor and the learners as it becomes difficult to sustain confidence in the learning process. Learners needed clear and prompt responses to confirm that their messages and their contributions were carefully read and evaluated.

Studies indicate that, in the absence of a social context, individuals pay more attention to the actual information exchanged, but may be biased towards more recent information (Siegel et al., 1996). Huber (1990) suggests that simple electronic communication, such as electronic mail or bulletin board systems, can be used to exchange factual or technical information. However, more advanced technologies, such as videoconferencing, may be necessary to communicate complex or socio-emotional information. In the absence of those advanced technologies, virtual activities may not be a viable option. One of the most common objections to e-learning is that it is impersonal. E-learning is impersonal if you fail to provide an e-coach for learner - someone learners can contact when they have questions and who checks up on learner as they go through courses. E-learning is also impersonal only if managers fail to recognise and rewards for participating in it (Carliner, 2002). Marchmont (2000) encapsulates the role of the e-tutor as being able to use technology creatively, is well organised, flexible and enthusiastic, gregarious, a good manager of learners and builder of team relations. Online tutoring needs to go beyond competence in ICT only. In online exchange, tutors need to be direct, constructive, proactive, positive and open to criticism.

Design tasks appropriate for ICT

The tasks designed for 'classroom environments' are not always appropriate for online situations. Learners and tutors both agreed that group work caused many difficulties in developing 'team cohesion'. The feedback from the learners implied that for set group tasks their peers initially generated more ideas, however in the latter stages exchanged fewer messages and took longer to complete work. Furthermore, there was evidence that learners 'opted-out' when they received negative feedback from their peers. Once the learners are more removed from 'social context' they are more likely to drop-out of the programme.

McGrath (1991) distinguished four types of tasks: generating ideas or plans, choosing among alternatives, negotiating conflicts and executing activities. From the virtual perspective, it is likely that the first two types may be more amenable to successful virtual accomplishment than the last two. Similarly Goodman et al., (1987) proposed that idea generation and alternative selection may be facilitated in an electronic environment. On the contrary, conflict management cannot be easily practised within a virtual environment. More likely, the outcome of virtual efforts is reports, product ideas or plans that become the basis for execution by others (Lipnack and Stamp, 1997). The use of the communication technology media, such as video-conferencing, may well lessen many of the problems associated with the tutor-learner and learner-learner interaction. Multimedia technologies can express communication cues such as vocal inflections, body language and facial gestures.

Psychology literature is replete with studies demonstrating a negative relationship between worker isolation and feelings of motivation and psychological involvement in a task (Finholt and Sproul, 1990). These studies show that, in the absence of face-to-face contact, the informal conversations and group interactions that tend to elicit feelings of meaningfulness, belonging and purpose in a group will be absent, reducing intrinsic involvement. Social environment is about appealing to desirable behaviour through 'soft' measures, so it's more concurrent with such terms as "normal control,'" 'normative control,' and "clan control' (Leifer and Mills, 1996). Moreover, social settings provide a supportive learning environments (Doz, 1996).

Conclusion

For on-line learners the varied nature of their learning context necessitates novel and overt forms of support, closely aligned to their learning needs. Despite the concerns of many academic staff, online learners still require and want the human support. For these learners effectual learning is a social endeavour where the relationship between tutor and learner is a foundation for the learning process. Such relationships can bring about collaborative learning where learning technologies promote interaction at suitable times. Social support provided by tutors can have a noticeable effect on the interaction where learners may be unwilling to contribute in online discussions through fear of derisory contributions or misinterpretation, lack of motivation, or lack of identity within the group.

Longitudinal studies could provide more socio-emotional elements of the relationship between the tutors and the learners. These would enable 'hot-spots' of the collaboration to be explored. Empirical studies could provide correlation between the backgrounds of learners and their adaptability to on-line environments. Such studies may provide guidance for admission tutors.

References

Bordia, P. (1 997) Face-to-face versus computer-mediated communication: a synthesis of experimental literature. *The Journal of Business Communication,* 34, 99-120

Carliner, S. (2002). What Executives must know about e-learning. Potomac Tech journal, March 18.

Claxton, G. (1999) Wise-up: the challenge of lifelong learning. London: Bloomsbury.

Cravener, P. (1999). Faculty experiences with providing online courses: thorn among the roles. Computers in Nursing, 17 (1), pp. 42-47.

Das, T. (1998) Between trust and control: developing confidence in partner co-operation in alliances. *Academy of Management Review,* 23 (3), 491-512

Finhoult, T. AND Sproul, L. (1990) Electronic groups at work. Organisational science, 1, 4161.

Gallupe, R., Bastianutti, L. and Cooper, W. (1991) Unlocking brainstorm. *Journal of Applied Psychology,* 76, 137-142.

Goodman, P., Ravlin, E. and Schminke, M. (1987). Understanding groups in organisations. I*n: Research in organisational behaviour,* 9, 121-173

Hartley, J. and Collins-Brown, E. (1 999) Effective pedagogies for managing collaborative learning in online environments. Educational Technology and Society 2 (3).

Hollingshead, A. and MCGrath, J. (1 995) Computer assisted groups: A critical review of the empirical research. In: *Team effectiveness and decision making in organisations,* Guzzo, R. and Salas, E. (eds), pp 46-78. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Huber, G. (1990) A theory of the effects of advances information technologies on organisational design, intelligence and decision making. *Academy of Management Review,* 15, 47-71

Johnson, S. (2000) Comparative analysis of learner satisfaction and learning outcomes in online face-to-face learning environments. Journal of Interactive Research 11 (1).

Marchmont (2000). Learner Support (2000). Report on Marchmont Workshop. St. James Park, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. October 2000.

Lipnack, J. and Stamps, J. (1 997) Virtual teams. In: *Reaching Across Space Time and Organisations with Technology,* John Wiley and Sons, New York.

MCGrath, J. (1 991) Time, interaction and performance: a theory of groups. *Small Group Research,* 22, 147-174.

Raelin, J. (1998). Work-based learning in practice. Journal of Workplace Learning, 19 (6).

Salmon, G. (2002). Pedagogical Requirements of Virtual Learning Environments: Pets and Planets.

UCISA TLIG-SDG User Support Conference: Keynote. Leeds UK April 2002

Siegel, J., Dubrovsky, V. Keisler, S. And McGuire, T. (1996) Group processes in computer-mediated communication. *Organisational behaviour and human decisions processes,* 37, 157-186.