Chapter 2
Behave Yourself!
An Investigation of the Impact of Tutor Behaviour on the Student Experience of Online Distance-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Research into the design, delivery, support, and administration of Online Distance Learning (ODL) programmes in higher education is developing but still nascent with theories and discourses from many areas of traditional education being examined and developed to address the particular affordances of online education. Whilst debate continues about the procurement of and best application of educational technologies and systems, one aspect of the debate seems clear, that the technology and content alone is not "e-learning." Directing someone to an online repository does not mean learning will necessarily take place. Whilst the technology and the content are essential, both are important only insofar as the affordances they provide for learning to take place. Using empirical evidence, this chapter argues that the actions of the tutor are therefore pivotal in an educational environment where the learning process is directed at more than simply accessing information.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the design, delivery, support and administration of online programmes in higher education is developing but still nascent (Haythornthwaite and Andrews, 2007), with theories and discourses from many areas of traditional (face-to-face and distance) education being examined and developed to address the particular affordances of online education (Thompson, 2007). New frameworks and theories continue to develop, bringing with them fresh terminology and ways of thinking that may ultimately illuminate what is still, to an extent, a new, transformative fron-

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tier in higher education. Whilst debate continues about the procurement and best application of educational technologies and systems, the debate makes it clear that technology and content alone is not 'e-learning'. Handing a learner a CD or directing them to an online repository does not mean learning will necessarily take place. Whilst the technology and the content are essential, in the same way as buildings and libraries are essential in campus-based education, both are important only insofar as they support they provide for learning to take place. As recognised by Haythornthwaite and Andrews, 2007: 18):

E-learning is not a computer system. You cannot buy it off the shelf and plug it in. You cannot hand it to network administrators and be done with the job. To have an e-learning system means having people talking, writing, teaching and learning with each other online, via computer based systems (Haythornthwaite and Andrews, 2007).

Many recognise this and there is consequently a good deal of interest in the place of online 'interaction' in the current literature, with discussions about 'community' and 'relationships' often at the forefront of these discussions. Many recognise that for learning to 'work' in the relatively lean (i.e. physically dislocated) online world, attention needs to be paid to developing and supporting interaction between the participants and it is clear that the most commonly used tools to support this interaction are CMCs (computer mediated conferences) or OADs (online asynchronous discussions), or more simply, "discussion forums" (Wever *et al.*, 2005, Picciano, 2002, Fahy, 2001).

Arguably the research focus into CMCs currently revolves around four key areas: whether and how CMCs support social presence, whether CMCs can support 'higher order' learning, whether learning can be described as 'collaborative', and the role and the effect of the tutor in CMCs. It is in this last category that this project is located, not least because it has been claimed that there is a lack of research on online tutor behaviour (Hopkins *et al.*, 2008, Mazzolini and Maddison 2002), but also because whilst there are numerous 'how to' online teaching guides, many of them are based on the experience of teachers, rather than students. As such, this chapter considers the research question:

How does tutor behaviour in asynchronous discussion forums impact on students?

We will look at both cognitive and affective influences as defined by the participants of this research. Evidence is presented from a mixed methods research project including a survey, and follow up qualitative interviews with students registered on any of three eMA programmes in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, the University of York.

This chapter first outlines the existing research base into the cognitive and affective elements of CMCs, although it must be noted at this stage that the literature reviewed is based on empirical research findings (with the exception of a small number of theoretical papers used to illustrate the genesis of some of the suppositions about online learning that the researchers are aiming to address). We have deliberately avoided anecdotal evidence or 'how to' guides, not because they are not useful to the practitioner and researcher, but because of the sheer number of these volumes and papers in existence today and our desire to investigate research-based findings. Some further filtering was required and thus we chose to focus on research findings primarily published in the last 15 years, a period of intense development in the use of educational technology in higher education (Wallace, 2003). Following this the research methodology is outlined and the research findings presented. The chapter concludes by considering how the research presented might contribute to current understandings of CMCs and the role and effect of the tutor.