
Chapter XV

Changing Roles and Processes in Online Tuition for Higher Education: A Case Study from the UK Open University

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ABSTRACT

The case study examines a Level 1 undergraduate course delivered totally online to 8,500 students of the UK Open University (OU). Context, philosophy, design and learning outcomes are described. The author compares personal experience of tutoring the course to normal OU distance teaching methods and argues that computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) has a major impact on student learning styles and in changing roles within the teaching team; a learning community develops, triggering co-learning, co-tuition and co-counseling. The CMC also enables efficient academic and administrative information flow, and fast feedback for informal evaluation. The evaluation cycle is completed by reference to student feedback via a Web-site questionnaire and institutional change action. The study shows that technology to support global delivery is adequately robust, and success rates on the programme are similar to other OU courses. Pre-entry and online educational guidance is identified as an area needing further consideration.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is written from the perspective of a tutor on the UK Open University (OU) course T171, which was first presented in February 2000. The course, called *You, Your Computer, and the Net*, is a 200-hour, 30 CATS points, Level 1 (1st year undergraduate) course which is delivered entirely online to mass numbers of students who can be based anywhere, assuming they have access to the Internet. Over 8,500 students initially registered for the February 2000 course; another 3,100 initially registered for a May intake. The intakes for 2001 were similar.

The move to mass online tuition and support represents a major step for the OU. Its first experiments with computer-assisted distance learning were in 1988, when computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) was introduced as part of the support arrangements for one of its social science courses. This was 17 years after the OU started its distance teaching programmes. In 1988 CMC via a home-based PC was viewed simply as one component of a multimedia package for course delivery and support. It supplemented the support from the tutor normally given through face-face contact and telephone. The course materials, in the form of high quality workbooks, came through the post as is normal for other OU courses; student assessment was via the normal form of written or typed assignments sent from student to tutor, also via post. All this has changed with the T171 online model of delivery, as has the relationship between student and tutor, along with many educational and administrative processes, including evaluation.

Hence this chapter will:

- provide some background to the OU and its development over the last 30 years of supported open-learning programmes using multimedia methods, and how this classical form of delivery is being augmented and challenged by experiments using Internet delivery;
- describe the underpinning philosophy and intended learning outcomes for T171, key to which are working collaboratively with other students using CMC and developing the necessarily skills of evaluating the information found on the Internet when undertaking research;
- describe the impact that CMC and Internet delivery is having on the relationships between tutor and student, which will be characterised by the terms co-learning, co-tuition and co-counseling, as well as the impact on the administration and evaluation of the course; and
- demonstrate the robustness of online delivery in terms of server and support systems and in terms of overall student success rate.

While the focus of the chapter is evaluation from a tutor perspective, to complete the evaluation cycle a reference to student feedback mechanisms will be provided to explain the institutional response in making changes to the programme in 2001 and 2002.

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