

RETHINKING LEARNER SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

EDITED BY ALAN TAIT AND ROGER MILLS



RoutledgeFalmer Studies in Distance Education

Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education

Distance learning is becoming an increasingly popular way of studying, and most universities now provide courses using these methods. Today's students, though, are demanding high quality, consumer-focused and flexible courses and learning resources, and active learner support. This means that providers of distance education need to reconsider key issues about their learner support systems, to ensure that this is delivered appropriately and effectively.

This book considers the changing needs and demands of distance education students. It draws together contributions from the UK, USA, Hong Kong, Australia, Japan, South Africa and Botswana, to offer an international perspective on:

- The challenges and opportunities of Informational and Communication Technologies (ICT)
- Quality assurance, commercialisation and the learner as consumer
- The impact of cultural differences on internationalised curricula
- The implications for learner support of a wider range of learners.

This book should be read by all those involved in developing and delivering distance education courses.

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Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education

Alan Tait and Roger Mills

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Change and continuity in an international
context

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For John Davison

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Introduction

It is a real pleasure and a privilege – far more than these hackneyed words might suggest – to contribute the Introduction to this book. The book addresses a theme of core importance to open and distance learning at the present time, namely that of change for learner support services. The range of challenges identified by the authors in this volume makes it clear that such an examination is both necessary and urgent.

The book derives from the 2001 Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning. This was the ninth in the series, and the great majority of chapters here were contributed in earlier versions as papers. The Conference has provided a focus for professional development in ODL, and in particular for learner support, over nearly twenty years. There have been few more sustainably fruitful and enjoyable experiences in our professional lives than building up the network of colleagues and friends from all around the world through our role as Directors of these conferences. The Conferences have contributed enormously to our own capacity to reflect on ODL, and to escape the parochialism which can derive from never lifting one's head outside one's own institution (for details of the 2003 meeting of the Cambridge Conference see www2.open.ac.uk/r06/conference/conference.htm).

The theme of this volume is the examination of change in the conceptualisation, management and delivery of learner support services. The challenges to learner support in ODL stem at present from a number of sources. These include:

- 1 The impact of ICT on what is wanted by learners today, what can be provided by institutions, and what restructuring of organisations has to follow;
- 2 The impact of the change of status from student to that of customer and consumer, which necessitates a change from 'obedient child' to 'adult and equal', and the attitudinal changes necessary on the part of the institution;
- 3 The policy drivers in a number of countries to include a wider range of learners as well as a larger number, and the tensions between the drive to use new media for learning and the issues of access and Widening Participation;
- 4 The challenge to the well-established institutions in their capacity to change quickly or be outpaced by younger institutions with less history (particularly acute for the second generation distance teaching universities around the world, now seen in some instances as conservative);

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- 5 The pressures on costs which drive fee levels and pricing in the increasingly competitive environments that many governments insist on for education;
- 6 The need to attempt more complex activities through ODL methods, including work-based education and training, with the workplace as a site of learning;
- 7 The organisational politics with both internal and external dimensions that have to be managed in this challenging change process;
- 8 The increasing recognition of the centrality of student support in distance education and its role in retention and income generation.

It can be seen that these challenges do not drive conveniently towards obvious policy and organisational solutions, but indeed work in tension with each other. This is borne out where for example many learners are ahead of their institutions in demanding ICT supported services, while in other cases institutions are having to maintain multi-channel systems of communication with all the concomitant costs, because some cohorts of students cannot keep up with the hardware demands and line charges. There is also the tension between 'building the business' in obvious and relatively easy areas, and maintaining the institutional mission which for significant elements within ODL has been about inclusivity.

It can also be seen that the range of issues that currently arise have much in common around the world, and this volume draws on African, Antipodean, Asian, European and North American perspectives. In all these parts of the world the same issues face managers and practitioners as they attempt to engage with change, improve quality, contain or diminish costs, and make progress in a tough and competitive environment. The evidence in these chapters points to the even greater importance of learner support, at the same time as insisting that change has to be addressed and delivered. Discriminating within the broad dimensions of change and continuity represents the core contemporary managerial task.

All the evidence from government as well as international organisations such as UNESCO and the Commonwealth of Learning points to the fact that it has never been more important to expand opportunity, at the same time as ensuring that students are successful in engaging with a personally worthwhile educational experience. We hope that this volume will inform practice, and contribute to change in policy and the delivery of improved service for the millions of distance learners around the world.

Alan Tait
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May 2002, Cambridge, UK

1 Constructivism or Confucianism?

We have the technology, now what shall we do with it?

Louise Aylward

Introduction

This chapter examines some of the issues that arise when a university with a strong ‘second generation’ Open and Distance Education culture, operating in a society that is technologically advanced yet still heavily influenced by its Confucian tradition, adopts, within a relatively short time, new communication technologies in course delivery. It looks at the likely impact of these technologies on tutor support and considers some of the institutional decisions that will have to be made if the new technology is to be integrated successfully.

Setting the scene

The OUHK

The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) started out as the Open Learning Institute (OLI), which was established by government ordinance in 1989. Its goal was (and is) to provide high quality and flexible further education opportunities for adults, primarily through distance learning. The Institute was granted self-accrediting status in 1996, and became the OUHK in May 1997. That first October 1989 semester, 4,237 students enrolled on the first eight courses; today the OUHK has more than 26,000 students and 16,000 graduates, and offers more than 100 postgraduate, degree, associate degree and sub-degree programmes. It is a self-financing, non-profit-making organisation.

The OLI took as its model the UK Open University, and the first courses it delivered used minimally adapted OU UK course materials. The medium of instruction was English and a typical course materials package consisted of printed study units, a textbook, possibly an audio or video cassette, and in some cases, TV programmes broadcast on Sunday mornings. On registering for a course, each student was allocated a tutor to support his or her learning; tutor groups contained up to thirty students. A flexible credit system was adopted – students earned credits for each course and accumulated credits towards a degree (a Bachelor’s degree requires 120 credits; a bachelor’s degree with honours, 160). Courses were run by course co-ordinators (CCs), academics who had dual responsibility for academic

content and course administration. Hong Kong being much smaller in area than the UK, one of the ways the OUHK differed from its UK counterpart was in its decision not to provide summer residential schools. It was felt that those students who wanted to mix with their peers would easily be able to travel to tutorials or day schools, so this was the system adopted. Also, because the majority of people in Hong Kong have somewhat compact living accommodation, it could not be assumed that students had the space to study at home, so from the beginning, study centres were provided, and science students, rather than being given home test kits, did their practical work in the OUHK laboratories.

This is how the situation was in the early days, but in fact, there has not been a great deal of change. The facilities have improved and been extended with the establishment of the OUHK's campus, and a Learning Centre on Hong Kong Island. Perhaps the major area of change is course development; the OUHK now develops the majority of its courses itself, and offers programmes in Chinese language and English (students have to opt for one medium of instruction). Courses are developed by course teams comprising a developer (internal or external), academic co-ordinator and member(s) (OUHK faculty), an OUHK course designer and an external course assessor. The range of media used to present courses has extended to CD-ROMS and, of course, the Internet. However, the model remains fundamentally the same, and indisputably 'second generation' (Nipper, 1989), and the institutional discourse continues to be heavily influenced by the ODE literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s; for example Holmberg (1989) defined the 'guided didactic conversation' – in OUHK manuals and documents, course materials are often defined as a 'simulated conversation' or a 'tutorial in print'. The concept of the autonomous learner (Peters, 1993) working through prepared course materials with the support of a tutor has become engrained in the OUHK culture. Perhaps it was enforced so strongly because there was a need to create a culture quickly; the OUHK was expected to become self-financing within a few years; it had to be up and running fast. And while its founding faculty all had experience of distance learning, the academics who became the backbone team of course co-ordinators generally did not; many had worked at local 'traditional' tertiary institutions and had to speedily assimilate the new teaching mode.

Hong Kong learners and OUHK courses

As the OUHK has an open access policy, its students have reached all levels of education: some may have left secondary school after finishing Form 3; others may have university degrees. The majority, however, are likely to have gone through the Hong Kong education system, which, it is generally acknowledged, is still influenced by the philosophy of Confucius. The Confucian tradition is teacher-centred, with a focus on the transmission of content (Robinson, 1999). In Hong Kong, Confucian values are blamed for the perceived tendency of Hong Kong learners to rely on memorising, rote-learning, surface learning, transmission modes of teaching and so on. These accusations are not entirely fair to Confucius, whose importance to education in Chinese culture derives from his conviction that everyone is educable (Lee, 1996); and Biggs (1996) suggests that some of the

learner characteristics identified as part of the Confucian tradition are oversimplified and misunderstood. However, when I arrived at the OLI in 1991, the theory of the passive, rote-learning, teacher-dependent Hong Kong learner certainly held sway. The autonomous learner model that I have described, with its emphasis on independence and self-direction was consciously presented as a counterpoint to some of the problematic aspects of 'Confucian' education. Students were told that, while at school they may have been used to being directed by teachers, now they were responsible for their own learning. They were encouraged to engage actively with the self-instructional course materials, which had been specially designed to promote such interaction, with objectives, activities, intext questions, activity feedback and so on.

The teams producing these materials, until very recently, worked to a more or less standard format with course templates dictating the shape of the materials. Time constraints meant that it was not always possible to produce mixed media, so courses predominantly took the physical form of printed study units. Time constraints also meant it was easier to produce the tried and tested format (behaviourist objectives, clear introductions and summaries, topics interspersed with activities and self-tests with feedback at the end of each unit) than to develop something new.

Within these parameters, course teams made great efforts to produce materials that presented multiple perspectives and engaged students in active learning through the familiar devices, conversational style etc. However, it is in practice quite hard to write a text that does not present as authoritative. Indeed, it could be argued that the fact it is a printed text *makes* it authoritative; certainly students from a Confucian background would be inclined to take it as so. Marton *et al.* (1996), while challenging the rote-learning stereotype, maintain that memorisation (rather than rote-learning) is one of the methods that Chinese students use to move towards understanding. It is easy to see how this learning technique transfers well to the processing of printed ODE course materials, however many interactive devices they contain. Of course it is possible to develop different, more flexible models, but innovation takes time, and also tends to meet with resistance from those who have a set view of what an 'OUHK course' should look like. So, in the end, the model that was perceived as a counter-attack on the passive learning of Confucian culture, turned out to fit in with it quite well, as students accepted the authority of the text.

If the teaching is in the text, then what is the role of the tutor?

OUHK tutors

Despite the emphasis on the course materials as the primary source of learning, the OUHK has always acknowledged the importance of tutor support in the learning process. In the 'pre-new technologies' tutor training manual, tutors were told that they would be expected to provide this support in three ways:

- 1 Marking and commenting on their students' assignments.

6 *Louise Aylward*

- 2 Providing telephone support.
- 3 Running face-to-face sessions for their students.

The current tutor manual has been updated to include the use of technology (I shall come back to that later) but there is no real difference between the role of the tutor as it was perceived in the early 1990s, and the role of the tutor today. As an open learning institution the OUHK must provide flexibility and choice, so it is made clear that while learners are encouraged to make use of their tutor's support, they are not obliged to do so. Student must be free to choose to study a course and achieve a pass in assessment without ever consulting their tutor. In some cases, therefore, the learner-tutor relationship exists solely in the dialogue in which the student submits an assignment, and the tutor comments on it. Nevertheless, much effort is put into persuading students and training tutors to make face-to-face tutorial sessions worthwhile learning experiences. Fung and Carr (1999) note:

As in many other distance education institutions, the OUHK advocates that tutorials should be participatory events, not straight lectures, and the message is strongly reinforced in the staff development sessions/materials for tutors.

In other words, the tutorials are intended to continue the 'active learning' approach adopted in the course materials. Students are expected to interact at face-to-face tutorials, not only with their tutor but also with each other. The students, however, are not always enthusiastic about this approach. The same study indicated that 'straight lecture' was what a lot of them prefer. They want their tutors to interpret the course materials, select the key points, tell them what to learn. Furthermore, there is evidence that many tutors feel obliged to respond to these demands, particularly in the foundation level courses. As an academic who came out from the UK in the early days of the OLI to conduct training sessions remarked to me: 'I expended a lot of effort in Hong Kong trying to get tutors to give what I regarded as student-centred sessions, and failed basically because neither tutors nor students believed in my value system for tutorial contact.'

Such a split between what is supposed to be happening and what actually does happen is by no means confined to the OUHK, as Fung and Carr are at pains to point out, but it does reinforce the view that OUHK learners, if not rote-learners, then at least prefer a transmission learning model. It is not that OUHK students do not value the support of their tutors; in many of the student profiles in University documents and the web site, while families tend to be the first to be credited with support, tutors often come a close second. However, they are valued for the individual feedback they give over the telephone or assignments, as well as for the knowledge they transmit in face-to-face tutorials, rather than for the facilitation of student-centred tutorials, which some students, it has to be admitted, consider a waste of their time.

To summarise then, the OUHK has, since its inception, subscribed to a western model of distance learning that in theory runs counter to the Confucian educational background of its students, but in practice has married with it quite well. The

concept of the autonomous learner is embedded in the OUHK culture but the emphasis is perhaps more on self-direction of study path rather than the development of independent thinking. The main teaching, until very recently, was delivered through printed and a/v course materials (and still is in the majority of cases). Tutor support is considered central to the success of the learning process, but the only interaction students are *required* to have with tutors is the submission of assignments for marking and feedback. Tutors are trained to facilitate interactive tutorials, but, due to student preference, often end up transmitting information instead. What changes in this model might the introduction of new technologies effect?

On-line learning at the OUHK

The decision to introduce new technologies into course delivery at the OUHK was taken in 1998 and after that, things moved fairly quickly.

In 1999 the OUHK adopted Web CT as its on-line learning platform (in the OUHK it is referred to as the On-line Learning Environment – OLE). (In fact, Web CT does not support Chinese, so the Chinese OLE uses Lotus Notes; but as the two OLEs look identical in structure apart from the language I shall confine my discussion to Web CT.) A number of courses were selected in each school for the pilot presentations in 2000 and 2001. With the exception of one or two courses (at the technological end of the spectrum), the Web CT platform was added on to existing courses, as an additional means of student support.

Web CT enables the delivery of on-line course materials (including text, graphics, audio or video), the electronic submission of assignments, and the provision of updates and news. It also has a number of ‘interactive tools’ – email, discussion board, chat and whiteboard – which students can use to communicate with their tutor and each other. It is the communication tools that have dominated the discourse of many ODE commentators, who see the potential of computer mediated communication (CMC) to build a collaborative and constructivist learning environment. For example, Jonassen (1998) (cited by Murphy, 1999) writes:

Contemporary conceptions of technology-supported learning environments assume the use of a variety of computer-mediated communications to support collaboration among communities of learners ... Learning most naturally occurs not in isolation but by teams of people working together to solve problems. CLEs should provide access to shared information and shared knowledge-building tools to help learners to collaboratively construct social shared knowledge.

And Harasim (2001) values CMC because it enables students ‘to construct knowledge as it is constructed in the knowledge communities they hope to join upon graduation’.

However, although today at the OUHK we have around 200 ‘on-line courses’ the communication tools are not very much used on most of them. System

administrators report low traffic, and course co-ordinators bear this out, saying that use of discussion boards is limited. Instead, the focus continues to be on delivery of course content, often by the provision of an on-line version of the printed text. In several of the Chinese medium courses, on-line interactive exercises and quizzes have replaced the activities in the printed version, but this ‘interactivity’ is between individual and course materials, so is pedagogically no different from its print counterpart.

This somewhat disappointing take-up of CMC cannot be attributed to difficulty in accessing the Internet. Hong Kong is a technologically oriented place with free local phone calls. Access to the Internet is very common and a survey of OUHK students in March 2001 indicated that 97 per cent of respondents had access to computers, 94 per cent had Internet access, 50 per cent had 56K modems and 35 per cent had broadband. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that so far the CMC tools remain underused on most courses (with one or two honourable exceptions). Why?

As one of my colleagues memorably put it, ‘we have new technology but the same old system’. Although the OUHK is keen to be at the technological cutting edge, its culture has not changed, nor has its model of what a distance learning course looks like (this is true at all levels of the University). Hence, the new technology is being used to deliver the course materials; but the change of mindset that would be required to shift the fulcrum of learning so that content delivery is at least potentially balanced by on-line interaction has not happened. This has made it very difficult for course designers to persuade course co-ordinators (and indeed Deans of Schools) to make access to the Internet mandatory on any of their courses. (The main reason they cite for this refusal is concern about excluding some students, but as we have seen, access is not really the problem.) Even if they are prepared to make access to the Internet mandatory (so that, for example, they can include links to external websites in their course), many course co-ordinators are reluctant to integrate on-line discussion or collaborative activities into the course. This goes back to the idea of the autonomous learner as one who works through course materials *alone*. Constructivist collaborative learning seems in opposition to their internalised model of a distance education course. This is a problem at institutional level too. For example, it would require the permission of the Senate and the OUHK Council to change the University regulations to allow collaborative assignments.

If the technology is not integrated with the course, it becomes an optional extra, which means that most students will not use it because their time is at a premium. In the 2001 survey of OUHK students two of the reasons given for *not* contributing to the discussion boards were that participation was not compulsory and it does not count towards assessment.

Tutors and the OLE

Much of the literature on on-line learning stresses the transformation of the teacher from instructor to facilitator (see Collis, 1996; Rowntree, 1999). As we have seen,

in theory OUHK tutors have always been encouraged to see themselves as facilitators, though in practice, have often found themselves in the role of instructor. Tutor training has not changed much either since the introduction of the new technologies. Tutors are encouraged to use the tools in the on-line delivery system: discussion boards, newsgroups, email and chat. They are told that their duties as a tutor supporting an on-line course may include the following:

- Leading discussions and answering questions on the discussion board
- Organising on-line tutorials
- Handling tutor-marked assignments on-line
- Answering emails

However, although they receive some technical training on the use of the OLE, they get a simple checklist of guidelines for e-moderating. Skilled e-moderating is crucial to successful on-line learning (Salmon, 2000) and tutors need more than a set of guidelines, they need a training course, preferably one that gives them experience of teaching and learning on-line (Rowntree, 1999). Once again, the retention of the second generation model, even though third generation technology is now available, is the source of the problem. It is not surprising that CMC is under-used when those responsible for facilitating it are under-prepared for this role.

The way forward

Clearly, if on-line learning, and CMC in particular, is to develop further at the OUHK, a number of changes will have to be made. But should we be taking this path? In these days of the student as consumer (Tait, 2002), should we even try to change the product when the indications are that our customers might well prefer the old model but delivered via new technology? If they want a transmission model, should we just give it to them?

Aside from questions of whether satisfying customers' needs means what they think they need or what faculty think they need, it seems clear that the new technologies inevitably bring change in their wake – in modes of delivery for example. But if the underlying pedagogical model is not at least reviewed, that technology may not be used effectively. For example, one of my colleagues on the Chinese course design team voiced reservations about whether the benefits students received from doing multimedia activities in on-line courses made the considerable amount of work it took to design and implement them worthwhile.

It is also worth pointing out that although, as a whole, the introduction of CMC into courses has had only a modest effect, in the few cases where it is integrated properly into the course design, the results have been much more encouraging. While some learners choose ODE specifically because they want to work alone, it seems likely that feelings of isolation are at least one of the reasons for the high dropout rate that is seen as a major drawback of traditional distance learning programmes (Bernard *et al.*, 2000). Hong Kong students certainly value connection with their fellows (in a focus group discussion in March 2001, several noted that

they actively sought such connection and found it beneficial). They are also highly likely to have the necessary technical skills, as use of email and the Internet is so widespread in Hong Kong.

However, as we have seen, CMC cannot just be an ‘add-on’. What is the most effective way of using CMC for OUHK learners? Not, I think (despite the title of this chapter) a full blown constructivist model. A constructivist/collaborative approach would probably not appeal to learners who retain their Confucian respect for the teacher or authoritative text. Bernard *et al.*’s interesting distinction between collaborative and collective learning seems relevant.

In cooperative learning, the result may simply add to a collection or incorporation of each individual’s work into the final product. However final products based on collaborative should represent a synthesis of the whole.

Bernard dismisses cooperative learning; but given what we know about Hong Kong learners, perhaps it should be revisited? It is worth exploring the use of CMC, and if it is to be effective, it must be integrated into courses. But care must be taken to avoid overloading students; if new technology is added, something else has to go (see Tait, 2002). Insufficient time is one potential danger area, but so is loss of flexibility (one of the other claimed virtues of distance education). Having studied in an on-line programme myself, I can confirm that once there is a requirement to participate in on-line collaborative activities, distance education becomes far less flexible. This has implications for OUHK course teams, particularly course designers. In our current ‘industrial’ model, we work on the course package but have little to do with it once it is produced. But now, as Thorpe (2001) suggests, the advent of CMC in ODE has blurred the boundaries: ‘Where for instance does one locate on-line interaction – within course design or learner support?’ On smaller population courses, it may well be that the academics running the courses also become the tutors. But it is hard to see how that could happen with larger courses. In their case, course designers will have to move from designing fixed content (delivered by whatever media) to designing the environment in which interactive learning can take place. So, as the boundary between design and support blurs, the gap between course designer and tutor will have to be reduced.

Implications for tutor support

If the boundaries blur and some of the teaching shifts from the course materials to the on-line moderated discussion, the role of the tutor will change and the University will have to provide appropriate support for this process. A number of issues need to be addressed, including training.

Tutors will need a whole set of skills. The course design team, recognising from their own experience that one of the best ways of learning about e-moderating is to participate in an on-line course, is planning a course on e-moderating, initially to be taken by course co-ordinators. Salmon’s (2000) five-step model may prove a suitable starting point for such a course:

- 1 Access and motivation: setting up system and accessing
- 2 On-line socialisation: sending and receiving messages
- 3 Information exchange: searching, personalising software
- 4 Knowledge construction: conferencing
- 5 Development: providing links outside closed conferences.

Lentell (2001) has queried whether this model would always transfer to other contexts, and Cox *et al.* (2000) found that on a large-scale computer course, participants rarely progressed beyond Stage 3. I think that Stages 3 and 4 represent a spectrum of interactivity which could probably be subdivided in different ways. This is very much a business model, each step building on the next. I suspect, however, that if Stages 1 and 2 are successful, knowledge construction on an individual but cooperative basis could occur at Stage 3. Notwithstanding these qualifications, it is coherent and convincing; and certainly the first two stages are essential if on-line learning is to take place on any level at all. It therefore will provide a useful *basis* for training tutors. The first cohort could then possibly become tutors in future presentations of the e-moderating programme.

There is a range of further issues to consider.

- *Balance of face-to-face and on-line tutoring*
To avoid overload of both tutors and students, if on-line tutoring (whether asynchronous or synchronous) is added to a course, it makes sense to reduce the number of face-to-face tutorials. This suggestion currently tends to meet with opposition at various levels, from senior management to students. Furthermore, Vermeer (1999) has shown that Hong Kong learners are less inclined to engage in on-line communication if they have not met their fellow learners at least once face-to-face. It seems that, for some time to come, it will be necessary to start off with face-to-face tutorials if on-line communication is to succeed at all, but equally, it will be necessary to persuade all players (including senior management) that some tutorials can usefully be replaced by on-line interaction.
- *Tutor:student ratio*
This will have to be reviewed. At present, tutor groups have thirty to forty students, depending on the level of the course. If e-moderating is to be taken seriously, tutor group numbers will have to be reduced.
- *Assessment*
Because assessment is so important, the OUHK (like other distance learning institutions) has fixed assessment procedures and processes. Tutor-marked assignments are central to the system. They were designed to fit the second generation model, and impose constraints on attempts to break away from it. However, if CMC is to be genuinely integrated into OUHK courses, assessment will have to be reassessed at an institutional level, and tutors, who may end up taking more responsibility for assessment, will need to be prepared (it is harder to give explicit marking guidelines for on-line or even group assessment activities).