Using E-learning tools to build a community of distance learners: A progress review and call for collaboration

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Abstract: The paper is an interim progress statement of a two year research project into how a higher education institution may develop online student support systems that effectively help build a community of distance learners. In doing so it seeks to investigate means of creating and maintaining learner social presence, similar attention is paid to the provision of non-academic support of learners and engendering a sense of identity and belonging to their learning community.

Drawing together theoretical and practical perspectives the paper is of interest to those engaged in supporting online learners. It looks how online collaboration and communication tools may be deployed to create a social community within online learners.

The paper recognises that non-academic support plays an essential role in setting the quality of student experience within distance learning and therefore is crucial to optimising success and retention rates. The utilisation of online technologies potentially permits institutions to prevent isolation amongst distance learners and narrow the gap between the experience of on-campus and off-campus students through increased sense of community and belonging.

We explore the work of the project to date in doing so it identifies the context of the project, the strategic importance and the rationale for conducting research into the key areas of investigation. We present the findings of the literature review and the preliminary research findings looking at usage and participation including barriers to participation and requirements for effective support identified by learners. This aspect looks at identified usage trends of existing facilities and looks at student perceptions of existing provision and the nature of support systems they would like to see incorporated.

We then outline future research activity in the provision of appropriate student support mechanisms and the measurement of their effectiveness along with the attendant project tasks set within the timescale. The project also represents an opportunity to seek collaborative exploration of the issues in conjunction with national and international partner higher education institutions.

The paper is of interest to practitioners engaged in supporting online learners along with those involved in the provision of distance learning based higher education, particularly those concerned with programme design and those responsible for the non academic support of distance learners.

Keywords: E-learning community, distance learning, learner support.

1. Project background: This paper serves as an interim report into an investigative project into developing an effective online distance community that encourages participation and engagement by distance learners. The project seeks to identify the nature and requirements of an effective community of learners from a theoretical and practical perspective. The project is founded on the notion which envisages that the community will consist of an environment whereby interaction with others will develop learner's skills as distance learners this is particularly relevant to those new to distance learning. It is foreseen that such development may come from experienced peers as well as university staff in what Rojas Drummond (2003: 37) terms "guided participation". Rogoff (1999: 75) suggests that "interaction with more skilled partners is necessary" for development and it is the apparatus that facilitates this interaction that the project seeks to identify.

Retention rates, success rates and the student experience are challenging issues in a distance learning context. Non-academic student support plays an essential role in addressing these issues. Effective support prevents isolation, creates a sense of identity with the wider UEL student community and enables distance learners to increase academic self-esteem which in turn counters negativity and

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dissatisfaction with the learning experience. It is acknowledged that social interaction is integral to academic success, Littlejohn and Pegler (2007) identify that online social networking removes barriers to forming online study relationships accordingly the project seeks to review and enhance social aspects of online community alongside the situated learning paradigm.

1.1 Institutional context: The institutional context of the distance learners is within a United Kingdom based university that received university status in 1992. The university has seen student numbers increase by 80% over the last 5 years and it is now home to 20,000 students studying full time, part time and via distance learning. 27% of learners are enrolled on post graduate programmes. The university is keenly aware of the need for flexible responsive programmes that meet the needs of potential students and is conscious of the potential of distance learning in meeting those needs whilst additionally widening participation. Consequently it has developed a range of distance learning programmes either directly delivered or indirectly delivered in collaborative partnership with non higher education institution commercial providers. In both instances the students are registered with the university and receive pastoral and distance learning support via the auspices of the distance learning delivery team although only direct delivery students have access to the online support community. Academics provide student support at the module and programme level, while School of Distance and E-learning based distance learning student advisors provide support at the institutional level. This support is primarily supplied within the University's virtual learning environment, the online site is known as the distance learning community.

The importance of developing a substantial portfolio of apposite distance learning programmes is recognised as a strategic priority within the University (UEL 2008) and has been identified as an area of increased focus and expansion, consequently it is imperative that the student support arrangements are such as to maximise the benefits of growth in equipping learners with the requisite skills to achieve as distance learners.

1.2 Distance learning provision:-The University currently has 3168 students studying via distance of which 274 are on one of the 10 direct delivery learning programmes at undergraduate or postgraduate level. The cohort consists of learners based in the United Kingdom, overseas students and a majority from within the European Union. Whilst on their programmes all direct delivery students have access to an online community whereby they can share their experiences with their peers, access frequently asked questions regarding their learning, ask an advisor and obtain information intended to assist learners in becoming effective studying via distance learning.

1.3 Existing distance learning community:-The existing distance learning students are supported via a variety of methods including access to distance learning student advisors via a telephone helpline and via email or discussion boards within an online community located within the university's virtual learning environment. The purpose of this community has evolved during its tenure and has been seen variously as a social space for students, an asynchronous online helpdesk and a repository for resources relating to effective online learning. There is a perception amongst staff engaged in supporting students that the structure and content does not encourage regular use and participation in the community. Consequently it is thought that guidance often becomes a one off occurrence or rather than reflecting UDACE (1998: 99) idea that "educational guidance is a process rather than a single event" as advisors endeavour to allow pupils to identify their needs and fulfil their potential.

The present distance learning community has grown organically rather than being based on a defined pedagogical framework and accordingly its composition and structure may not meet the needs of students or the university. The project seeks to coalesce these needs and aims into a specified purpose upon which to build a support and collaborative social structure congruent with fulfilling those aims.

The university provides consultancy in online instructional design to external organisations therefore it is commercially sound to develop an exemplar of online distance learner support to augment the consultancy offerings.

2. Views of community: In investigating the possible anatomy of the proposed community it is prudent to explore the various manifestations of a community and how they may assist in defining a blueprint upon which the foundations of the community may be built within the context.

Mercer (2000) identifies one of the indicators of a community as collective identity engendered through distributing knowledge, shared goals and collaborative experience. In our context these are attributes that we would seek to propagate in our online distance support community.

Communities may be described and identified by a variety of factors. Lave and Wenger's (1991) view of communities of practice takes the view of a community as a series of concentric circles with full knowledge and participation at the centre and describes how newcomers to a community can move from the outer edges towards the centre through guided participation by an 'expert' of the community. During that journey the participation of the newcomer becomes ever more legitimate, less peripheral and theoretically more engaged. The nature of that expert can vary it could in our context be an able peer in the guise of an experienced distance learner or a staff member such as a distance learning advisor. In our context it may be construed that 'ownership' of the community rests with the institution therefore control of content, moderation of discussion and quality control may be exercised via the distance learning student advisors. Whilst there may be a desire and even need to exercise such controls towards the input of 'expert' able peers it must be employed with caution so as not to undermine status and consequently have a negative affect on their input and participation.

The notion of a community of practice may not fully reflect our notion of our distance learning community for whilst McConnell (2006) suggests they provide robust conceptual models for virtual communities the term learning community may be more appropriate in that McConnell (2006)suggests that it sets out to focus on learning whereas a community of practice does not. However that in turn does not address our concomitant aim of a social space for learners as well as a learning space and that they should not be discrete areas but mutually supportive of each other. Given the anticipated inter relation between socialisation, learning and input from distance learning advisors it may be apposite to investigate the community of inquiry model which Garrison and Vaughan (2008) identify as recognising the social presence, cognitive presence and teacher presence (which in this instance may be represented by advisory staff). Social presence of our learners may be expressed through collaboration, communications and community cohesion engendered by joint participation, social activity and sharing ideas and experiences. Cognitive presence may be manifested through exploration and resolution of problems through access to materials and support from distance learning advisors and peers. Teaching presence may be represented through the actions of the advisors and the role of able peers through design, facilitation and direction. It is apparent that this model with due acknowledgement to the influence of community of practice is the most apposite theoretical framework upon which to build our notion of an online community.

We rightly hold that participation is crucial to the success of the community for without engagement a community can not exist thus it is pertinent to consider potential constraints to learner participation whether technological or learner centred.

Access to technology whether through computer ownership, internet access or computing skills presents fundamental challenges regarding the equity of availability of the online community to the whole of the student cohort.

Where existing users are actively engaged they tend to utilise community specific language not readily understood by outsiders, in our instance that may manifest itself as distance learning or educational terminology and acronyms, similarly given the online nature of the community it may be online language such as truncated text speak, emoticons or acronyms. Mercer (2000) suggests that fluency in the language is an indication of membership of a community therefore in our instance in may be necessary to investigate how we might equip learners with the necessary skills. Language could therefore be viewed as a barrier; Wenger (2007) notes that such boundaries particularly influence participation by newcomers and thus appropriate support must be readily available to new community members from the outset.

Perceived or real inadequacy in language, technical computing skills and knowledge of distance learning techniques can all be causes of non participation in what Wenger (2007: 216) describes as "marginalities of competence". These may be addressed by appropriate support and access to resources whereas Wenger's second cause of non participation namely "marginalities of experience" whereby community members are affected by prior experience, feel shunned or ostracised. Such instances are much harder to address and in creating an effective online community it is important

that it is not knowingly or otherwise unreceptive to newcomers and thus undermine the rationale for its existence.

3. Project rationale

As previously intimated the project is intended to explore the requirements of an effective online support community for distance learners and has a two year tenure and is supported by £10,000 worth of internal funding. Through eliciting the views of learners and staff the project is intended to evaluate the relative success of existing support provision and identifies areas for development in providing non-academic support for distance learners.

When the project was initially envisaged the provision of distance learning within UEL was in its infancy and accordingly the project focussed on the preliminary design of the distance learning community. Given the rapid growth in distance learning delivery the community support system has had to grow organically to respond to demand. Given the further proposed growth in distance learning it is appropriate that we now measure our distance learning support systems to ascertain if they are fit for purpose and are capable of meeting the challenges inherent with further expansion of distance learning. Consequently in light of changes in UEL's strategic direction particularly regarding the home distance learning market, it has been necessary to consolidate the aims and outcomes.

3.1 Aims and objectives: The aims of the project include:

- Present an opportunity for distance learning students to engage in developing learner support systems through their participation in online surveys and interviews.
- Investigate existing usage of our distance learning support provision in order to identify areas of potential development whilst ascertaining barriers to student participation.
- Benchmark existing distance learning student usage as a baseline to measure future take up as a result of improvements initiated.
- Evaluate the suitability of online collaborative and communication tools that will contribute to enhancing the distance learning student experience.

The specific outcomes of the project comprise:

- Provide mechanisms that may be utilised for obtaining feedback regarding levels of student satisfaction.
- Developing a defined pedagogical framework to review student support provided within the UEL distance learning community.
- Provide a scalable model of non-academic distance learning student support, advice and guidance that is effective in enhancing the learning process and their experience of UEL.
- Adopting strategies to encourage student engagement with discipline based networks, peers and the wider learning community.
- Produce a suite of constructive complementary activities for students geared to encourage greater student access of distance learning support mechanisms.
- Ensure that our learner support systems meet recommendations issued by international and national quality assurance and licensing agencies.
- Dissemination of the project outcomes to internal and external stakeholders in distance learning provision through conference attendance and publication of the report.

3.2 Project plan

The project plan incorporates the following key tasks.

- Identify key aims and outcomes
- Identify the project date and key milestones
- Seek internal ethical approval
- Define the existing support delivery module
- Review the current nature of activities and support available within the online community
- Define intended purpose of the community
- Identify theoretical and pedagogic framework for the community (including literature review)
- Review current usage statistics

- Analyse & evaluate current usage statistics
- Conduct distance learning advisor focus groups
- Conduct online survey of all direct delivery students into their views and perceptions of the community
- Conduct online focus groups of learners
- Analyse and evaluate responses of surveys and focus groups
- Identify suitable activities, tools and structures congruent with the aspirations for the community
- Identify and define the role of the distance learning advisor
- Identify and service staff development needs arising from definition of the distance learning advisor role
- Testing of proposed activities, structures and tools
- Release of proposed activities, structures and tools
- Obtain feedback regarding 'new look' community
- Project review and evaluation
- Dissemination of findings

3.3 Ethical considerations

The questions included within the online questionnaire and proposed online focus group, have been designed so as to not elicit personal information other than that detailed in the ethical approval documentation namely gender, age range and IT skills.

It has been made clear that participation is not compulsory and that it does not constitute a component of the learner's study.

Data collected through the questionnaire/focus group will be made anonymous. A summary of data collected will be available to participants upon request.

3.4 Current findings

Participation in the existing community has been variable from both staff and students; whilst staff monitor the site on a regular basis their involvement is reactive rather than proactive. Whilst the existence of the site is advised to students there is no compulsion for them to access the site and is viewed by staff as an additional service rather than an integral part of the student's learning experience.

Of the 274 learners with access to the existing community 141 (51%) have logged into the online community. Of those 141 students they log on a total of 1427 times at an average of 10 times per academic year. The primary focus of the current community is online discussion boards which have been accessed by 83 students or 59% of those that log in. Student posts have been created by 30 students. 53% of discussion posts are generated by students and 47% by distance learning advisors.

The figures show that almost half of the cohort have never accessed the community and therefore have never derived any benefit from it. Our challenge is in identifying the reasons behind this non access and investigating means of lowering the number of learners not utilising the community.

Of the total cohort approximately 30% passively engage in the main communication medium of reading discussions and a somewhat paltry 11% of all those that have access to the community actively contributing through posting discussion threads. Web based information was accessed 1.5 times more than collaborative items like discussion threads. Most threads were initiated by students thus substantiating the advisors view that they perceive their involvement as reactive.

The results suggest that the existing community offering is not successful in engaging learners in the community. Particularly challenging is the 49% who have never accessed the community and further research is required to identify the underpinning reasons. The usage statistics intimate that the current online community does not meet the needs of students.

3.5 Staff feedback/role of the tutor

Through a series of focus groups incorporating semi structured questioning the views of distance learning advisors was obtained.

As intimated earlier, staff perceive their present involvement as responding to questions arising from learners rather than being the facilitators and designers of a vibrant social learning community. They would like to be more proactive but identify constraints such as no time set aside to develop activities or to be present online at a certain times, lack of a clear concept and rationale for the community due to its organic growth and uncertainty as to the responsibility of the role.

They seek greater input initiating activity whereby they as McConnell (2006) suggests create discussion and provide initial scaffolding as instigators rather than a reactive role. In such an approach they would act as a catalyst for interaction between students and help maintain activity.

Within the community of practice model where distance learning advisors may assume the mantle of expert it is imperative that distance learning advisors are equipped with the relevant skills and tools to fulfil this role. These skills are likely to incorporate the five characteristics identified by Salmon (2004: 54) namely "understanding of the online process, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise and personal characteristics". This blend of technological and interpersonal skills has the potential to encourage and ensure meaningful learner participation and engagement.

4.0 Forthcoming actions

Upon review of the research data possible collaborative tools and activities aimed at providing a meaningful and engaging experience for learners will be devised, tested and implemented.

4.1 Further research

The project research consists of analysis of computer generated user data from the existing online community, student learner questionnaires and focus groups of students and distance learner advisors.

Student learner surveys have been developed and are being administered, these are geared to confirm other qualitative data and identify student requirements of the support mechanism along with barriers to participation and potential means of negating such barriers. The instruments consisting of open and closed questions along with Likert scale questions are designed to investigate why learners do or do not use the existing community, what they feel is useful and that which they view as unhelpful and what aspects that they would like to see incorporated into the revised online community. The research is intended to build upon McConnell's (2006) findings into participation in online discussion and other works and expand those views to other forms of engagement within an online community of distance learners.

Research has been undertaken to appraise the distance learner support provision of other higher education institutions alongside a review of relevant literature to inform pedagogic choices made as a result of the investigation.

Upon completion of the collation of responses they will inform the design basis of the operational model which will be implemented in November 08. It is envisaged that a further brief learner feedback survey will be instituted to gauge success of the model in February 09.

The final report is due for completion in May 09 with presentation to conferences in the months following. Once the revised community has been operating it will be beneficial to investigate its impact upon achievement.

4.2 Altered provision and review

The future nature of online distance learning will be shaped by the findings of the research project however any such design must focus on creating a space, resources and activities that permit learners to participate in what McConnell (2006:31) describes as "social learning environments". Accordingly the design should reflect an emphasis upon what we view as the '3C's' of social learning, namely community, collaboration and contribution.

Staff feedback has identified that they believe regular events such as master classes in distance learning techniques, job hunting workshops incorporating interview skills and curriculum vitae writing along with other sustainable social activities would encourage regular visits to the online community and would in turn lead to greater utilisation and participation. It will be enlightening to see if these views are correlated by the views of learners.

All new designs and alterations will be tested for technical reliability and fitness for purpose prior to release to the community.

Once amendments are effected feedback from learners and staff will be solicited via a small scale investigation alongside an analysis of access statistics.

5.0 Ancillary outcomes achieved: The project team has had the opportunity to investigate the practice of other Higher Education institutions and to compare them against our own practice. We have been able to reflect critically on our current practice as a basis of looking for potential improvements.

The literature review has greatly contributed to extending the team's theoretical conceptions and formed a sure basis for sound pedagogic choices relating to both the project and other aspects of their expertise and responsibility.

The project team has taken many useful lessons from the project thus far. Such lessons include revising their research aims, opportunities and methodologies in response to changing circumstances, trends and issues in distance learning, such flexibility and responsiveness will serve them well in future projects.

6.0 Call for collaboration:-It is fully appreciated that we are not the sole institution to encounter the need for an effective online support community for distance learners and there exists many commonalities with other Higher Education institutions regarding the issues raised in the project and therefore actively seek collaborative opportunities with colleagues from other national and international institutions in order to draw distinctions and parallels in approach and practice with the intention of identifying a coherent and consistent framework.

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