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The loneliness of the long distance student: supervising students you rarely see

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The loneliness of the long distance student: supervising students you rarely see.

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INTRODUCTION

There is little denying that higher education in the UK has changed dramatically over the past few years. The number of full-time students in part-time employment rose by 54% over the 10 years to 2006 (TUC, 2006). Since that report it is likely that the numbers have increased as public subsidy has decreased. Being full-time, for many students, no longer means having nothing to do but study. Education is something that students now have to fit in around the rest of their lives. Accompanying this has been a structural shift in modes of study. Part-time students are now 43% of the total student population (Million+, 2010). In 2009/10 there were 770,000 part-time students in the UK (HESA, 2011). Changes to funding mean that students now consider themselves as consumers and lecturers as service providers. If they cannot find the time to meet with us then, in this increasingly service orientated industry, we have to find the means to provide them with viable alternatives. In effect, the future for many higher education institutions is very similar to the present in my own – The Open University.

So, what does all this mean for those of us engaged in supervising students? The expectation that students can and will attend lectures, seminars and all the extra-curricular activities on offer will no longer hold for a large proportion of students. Let me be clear, however. These changes will not apply to all students: full-time will still be the major mode of study for most students. Not all part-time students will become distant learners, most will attend lectures and seminars and will build their studies into their lives in creative ways. But, as the proportion of students studying either at a distance, or on a part-time basis grows the ways in which we deliver the educational experience must adapt.

In this chapter what I want to do is suggest some ways in which academic staff might create more flexible learning methods better suited to this new type of student. In drawing upon work carried out on the HEFCE funded project PARLE (see Middleton & Bridge, 2008 for an overview, and Middleton, 2009 for some examples of the teaching), I want to suggest that e-learning far from being a threat (see for example Lambeir & Ramaekin,2006), or a nirvana (see for example, Salmon, 2005) provides a set of tools which can supplement the more tried and tested methods of supervision. Indeed, most of these tools can be used, with a little imagination, to supplement lectures and seminars too.

SUPERVISING STUDENTS

Whilst most part-time and distant students can arrange their lives to accommodate structured teaching opportunities, the more 'ad hoc' relationships associated with supervising dissertations and theses may present more of a challenge. There is considerable evidence that students who develop a good working relationship with their supervisors tend to achieve better results (see, for example, Holmberg, 1986; McMann, 1994; Sewart, 1993; Keegan, 1986) It is clear that the student-supervisor relationship is usually envisaged in terms of a one on one engagement taking place in the supervisor's study. For example, Chris Hart gives the following advice to Masters students:

> Use your supervisor as much as possible throughout your dissertation research. They have the experience of supervising many previous students and therefore have a knowledge you do not have. They will be able to help you to formulate your ideas on a topic, direct you to reading and may even suggest a topic they know can be done. (Hart, 2005:78)

Now it may well be the case that there are supervisors who fulfil these criteria. But a number of supervisors, particularly inexperienced newer colleagues may have little previous experience and don't possess the encyclopaedic knowledge necessary to deal with every students dream project. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, many students will not be in a position to use their supervisor as much as they might like. Work, family and personal commitments are increasingly likely to intervene in the relationship, particularly with the growth of part-time and distant students.

The kind of activities which promote independence of thought and scholarly skills are often undertaken in supervision circumstances arranged to coincide with a particular crisis point. Part-time/distant students can feel further marginalised as they lack the opportunity for ad hoc meetings to which they assume, rightly or wrongly, that full-time on-campus students have ready access. As a part-time PhD student myself I remember feeling that there was a whole on-campus world of which I was an outsider. Other PhD students seemed far more integrated into the academic community than I was able to be. In this context failure and drop-out become a more likely outcome of those whose need for support, guidance and care outweighs their desire for independence.

The student-supervisor relationship is complex being simultaneously, subject and skills driven. The subject is the pivot on which the skills element turns. But, without developing the necessary skills, the student's interest in the subject will never extend beyond repetition of existing sources. Lisa Harrison notes that in doing a dissertation attention must be paid to both *generic* and *specific* skills.

> Generic skills apply equally to all dissertations: it is the ability to present a clear, structured argument which demonstrates an appreciation of the relevant information and appropriate writing skills. Specific skills should reflect the nature of the dissertation: being able to apply appropriate political theory(ies), operationalising appropriate methodological skills and developing knowledge in a particular research area. (Harrison, 2001: 143)

From a supervisors point of view there are 5 key areas which the student needs to address. See Box 1.

Box 1: Key areas in supervision

- What question is the student trying to answer with their dissertation/thesis? Is the question sensible and manageable? Is the question too narrow, or too wide? Does it require resources (for example, time) that the student is unlikely to have?

- What knowledge are they building on? Is their topic related to their undergraduate studies or a previous dissertation? Are they attempting a PhD when they should be doing an undergraduate dissertation? How do you limit their ambitions?

- How much reading do they need to do? How much new material do they need to read? What sources should they be encouraged to look at (Wikipedia)? When should they stop reading?

- Is their study empirical, theoretical or a mixture of both? How do you help them to develop a theory? What empirical methods are appropriate for their research question? How important are epistemological considerations?

- What is an appropriate academic writing style? How do they avoid 'inadvertent' plagiarism? How much of what they write should be in the final product?

E-LEARNING

E-learning as a term has existed since at least the mid-1980's (Middleton, 2009) and can mean anything from posting lecture notes on a server to fully integrated online courses.[1] What follows are brief discussions of four relatively easy to use web-based applications - blogs, wikis, podcasts and screencasts - which could be used to deliver supervision to part-time/distant students.

Clearly different students require different types of support. Some are self-managing and require only the occasional meeting (or email) to keep them on target. Others need a more hands-on approach. A range of e-tools could be used to assist in this work. Whilst there is no real replacement for face to face interactions, it is possible to do some of the work via the use of online tools – aimed either at individual students or groups of students.

BLOGGING

There are around 60 million blogs on the internet, and it is estimated that a blog is created every second. The term was coined in the 1990's as a way to describe online diaries. Blogs can be either public (anybody, anywhere can see them) or private, so that you can share your thoughts with just your students. There are a number of free, easy to use, blog systems including Google's Blog spot. It took me precisely 10 minutes to create a blog using their blog creation wizard.[2] You could also use the free system at www.posterous.com or your own institutional website (For an example, see Jim Newell's politics blog at http://jlnewell.com/blog/).

Blogging does require some commitment on your part. Very often people start a blog, make one or two entries, and then run out of enthusiasm. This can be because they were unsure what their blog was trying to do from the outset. Like most educational endeavours a little planning goes a long way. See Box 2

Box 2: Some topics for your blog

- Does the bibliography count in the word count?

- How many quotations are permissible before it becomes plagiarism?

- What's the difference between a research question and a research topic?

Each blog entry should be no more than 1,000 words. It should be written in an accessible style, it is not an academic paper or textbook chapter. It should pose

questions and encourage readers to comment and respond. A really good blog will have comments on your text, plus comments on comments. But, clearly, if your audience is limited then the chances are that commentary will be rare, so don't necessarily judge your blog by the debate it creates, but rather by how you can point students to what you have written rather than have them camping outside your door needing your advice.

Don't underestimate how much time it takes to write 5-600 words on a regular basis. Many bloggers tend to produce random streams of consciousness, the best blogs - unless, they happen to be extremely witty (very few bloggers are as witty as they think they are – a bit like lecturers, then) – are subject specific. Of the 60 million blogs on the internet, I would wager that at least half have no entries from the past six months. It is important if you blog to your students to ensure that you put aside a set time each week to do so. Make Thursday afternoon, for example, blogging day. That way, your students will come to expect the blog on a Thursday afternoon and will set aside Thursday evening to read and comment on it (hopefully). See Box 3.

Box 3: Top blogging tips

- Keep them short
- Keep them regular
- Ask questions that invite comments

WIKIS

The word wiki derives from the Hawaiian term meaning "quick". Wiki's have been around since 1994 when they were 'invented' by web designer Ward Cunningham and the most famous, some might say infamous, example is Wikipedia, which launched in 2001. This is not the place to have a debate about the pro's (yes, there are some) or cons of Wikipedia. Your institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – usually Blackboard or Moodle – will include the capacity to create a wiki. The question is: how useful could it be in supervising students?

What follows then is one example from the Open University Masters Foundation Degree Module on a way in which we used a wiki to create an interactive exercise to assist students in sifting through potential sources[3]. The teaching objectives of the module were to encourage students to use a variety of sources, but to privilege academic sources. So, in effect we were using a wiki in an attempt to undermine Wikipedia. This involved setting up a number of linked pages, the first of which was a simple instructions page.

Each page is linked to another page via a hyperlink. These are very easy to set up, usually requiring you to click on a link called hyperlinks. At the top of the instructions page we put in bold: **Please don't edit this page**. This was put in following previous iterations of the module where the wiki pages became a jumble of student entries and the instructions of what to do were lost in the middle somewhere. At the bottom, following the introductory text are a series of hyperlinks to three 'case studies', each containing a research question and a list of sources.

Most students carried out the exercise and the wiki page for comments became very long indeed. This module contained over 200 students, all studying at a distance. Every student in the last cohort tackled the exercise and the vast majority reached the correct (in my view) conclusions.

There could be a number of uses of wikis in the supervision process. For example, it would be possible to set up a wiki with sub-sections for different topic clusters, allowing students with an interest in feminism, Marxism or Italian politics to create their own community of scholars. A place where they could discuss what they have in common as well as how they differ. Or, you might use a wiki as a repository for any original research asking students to upload datasets that they have created, interview transcripts, research notes or draft chapters for others to share and comment on. See Box 4.

Box 4: Uses for a wiki

- Create communities of learners
- Create a repository for students own data
- Set up interactive exercises for assessing sources, referencing etc.

PODCASTING

A podcast is an audio file available for downloading via an RSS feed. Creating a podcast is fairly easy. All you require is a microphone and recording software. A number of academics are already using podcasts, some of which are professionally made.[4] Of the more home made variety, many are done using the free software programme Audacity, available for download at www.audacity.com.

There has been a considerable literature on podcasting, although to be honest most of it espouses the benefits without any great evidence to back up the claims (Booth, 2007). There is also a wealth of free advice on the internet about how to make a podcast. From my own experience with the medium let me pass on what little I have learned. My inclination on making my first ever podcast was to simply speak into a microphone on a topic which I felt students were struggling with. When I played it back I quickly realised how incoherent I was. There were a lot of mm's and ah's which was bad enough but a couple of times I also lost my way. Quickly abandoning my pretensions to be the new A.J.P. Taylor, I decided to type a script. I duly typed out my script and then read it into a microphone. Pleased with the result I played it back and surprise, surprise, I sounded like a person reading a script. The joke, not that funny to begin with, was entirely flat. The whole thing was a very dreary 15 minutes worth of recorded boredom. Inadvertently, I may have found a cure for insomnia. Sounding natural is not as easy as professional broadcasters make it seem. However, after recording and playing back the same script 4 or 5 times the results improved both because I became more relaxed and I had learned the script off by heart.

Based on these early experiences I realise that it is incredibly difficult to speak for 5-10 minutes (and the average podcast, if it is to be listened to, should be no more than that) without stumbling over the words. It was at this point that I realised something I had learned in making audios at the Open University with professionals at the helm. Actors also stumble over their words, but rather than collapse into a fit of giggles (although some do) or give up, they simply pause go back and read it again. The pause is important as it allows the editor to delete the parts that didn't work so well. But, given that I was to be the editor, I thought it might be good to practice on a smaller section first. I therefore recorded precisely one minutes worth of material. With pauses and mistakes this took about five minutes. The pauses allowed me to delete out all the mistakes and hey presto, there it was – one minutes worth of seamless audio ready to be unleashed upon an unsuspecting student audience.

Of course, I still had to do this a further nine times before I had the 10 one-minute sections that would be made up into the whole thing. Altogether this 10 minute sequence took me about a day to complete. Although this included creating a transcript, which I did by transcribing the completed tape. I have since progressed to a point where the process is quicker and easier. I now write a script, in about 5 two-minute slots. I don't read the script, anymore than I would read my lecture notes, but they provide a structure. When I am happy with the section I then edit it, which is usually a question of simply taking out all the mistakes, and then listen to it and amend the transcript.

This file can then be uploaded onto a server, a process that will probably require you to liaise with your technical department. It is possible to add music and sound effects to your podcast. But if you are thinking of doing so remember that copyright restrictions in the UK are very strict. There are websites where you can download copyright free music[5]. If all you want is an opening piece of mood music then this avoids any copyright complications. On the other hand, you might be able to persuade your institution that £3000 for that clip from Pavarotti is a good use of their money. See Box 5.

Box 5: Podcasting – some tips

- Use a script, but try not to read it
- To sound natural, do a number of retakes
- Avoid copyright complications by downloading royalty free music

SCREENCASTING

The final e-tool which is easy to use and free is screencasting. Technically a screencast is a tool which captures what is happening on your screen as a video file.

Screencasting has been fairly extensively used by software companies to create simple online tutorials. Many of us will be familiar with the Microsoft screencasts used to support their Microsoft Office suite of programmes. Their use in higher education is less well documented, with Petersen (2007) claiming that it remains a relatively new idea. Falconer et al (2009) used screencasts to supplement their chemistry classes claiming that these simple to create 'videos' are "quite similar to what could be presented in class, but students can go through them at their own pace." Whilst Loch (2011) used screencasts to support a maths course "to explain topics students usually find difficult to understand". Screencasts require detailed planning to coordinate the script with what is happening on screen. The free software for doing this is fairly limited and I would suggest the free programme Jing (www.techsmith.com/jing) for a tool that sits on your desktop and is easy to use

The technical ability to make a screencast is no more than the ability to download and install this piece of software. It is then simply a question of clicking the record button and using the 5 minutes which you are allowed to say something useful over the screen. You will have already seen the potential problem, however. Whilst Jing does allow you to pause a recording whilst you are making it, you do need to plan how you intend to use your five minutes of fame. As with podcasting I would advise splitting the time into discrete sessions. So five lots of one minute which allows you to get your breath and change your screen if necessary. The other major problem with Jing is the inability to edit after the event. This requires specialist software such as Camtasia, which whilst not prohibitively expensive will cost upwards of £140 for a

single user licence. If you are intending to use screencasts on a regular basis then well worth the investment in my opinion. However, once you have created your screencast you can upload it to www.screencast.com and circulate the URL to your students, who can then access it from their computer.

The advantage of a video file is obvious. If you want to show students how to interpret a table of data, or discuss an image then the ability to be able to see as well as hear brings a new dimension to e-learning scenarios. A screencast does not have to resemble a professional video (actually, it's unlikely to) to be effective. You may want to create a screencast that shows students how to write an abstract or illustrates how to reference their work. If you want to encourage the use of RefWorks or similar programmes then a single screencast will allow your students to follow your instructions at their own pace. Moreover, students could be encouraged to present their research as a screencast which other students could then comment on. See Box 6.

Box 6: Screencasting – some tips

- Plan ahead thinking about what images complement your script
- Use PowerPoint animations to create dynamic movement on the screen
- Record in short sections (one minute at a time)

Conclusion

E-learning is here to stay. Whilst it is true that many e-learning tools have been introduced in what Booth (2007) called an "evaluation bypass", the 'early adopters' (Rogers, 1995) will continue to experiment with new software and the rest of us will struggle to keep up. E-learning is being driven by what I would call 'the 3 E's' – economics, experimentation and expectations. Universities in the UK have been forced to become leaner and more cost effective. One place Vice Chancellors look to make savings has been in the area of e-learning. But, at the same time, lecturers with an interest in teaching have always experimented with new methods of delivery (Middleton, 2010), and will continue to do so. But, what is really driving the e-learning boom is that the expectations of students are changing. Students are switched on; they possess smart phones, i-pads, laptops. They now expect free wifi connections, course websites, and instant access to their tutors via email and text. This is a massive shift in educational expectations in a single generation. Lecturers who refuse to be online or who do not engage with e-learning will in Lambeir and Ramaeken's pithy rephrasing of Shakespeare face 'the choice *to be* online *or not to be*' (2006:545).

The four tools discussed in this chapter are not groundbreaking; neither do they require a sophisticated knowledge of computing. They adapt the skills most lecturers already possess to the challenges facing us today. They are what I like to think of as a set of survival tools equipping you for the e-learning present. They each have their advantages and disadvantages but anybody with a computer and internet connection should be able to begin experimenting with these tools, and in doing so should be able to find creative uses for e-learning that rather than threatening their identity as educators will enhance it.

Final word: e-learning is about sharing. Let me know if you feel inspired to experiment as a result of this chapter or if you have any further questions visit the blog at http://helearn.blogspot.com/2011/09/supervising-students-using-e-learning.html

[1] Examples of e-courses can be seen at The Open University's OpenLearn website (www.open.ac.uk/openlearn). In addition, I have placed a number of resources which I have been involved in developing over the past 5 years at: http://labspace.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=7515 which are you are free to experiment with.

[2] You can view it here: http://helearn.blogspot.com/2011/09/supervising-students-using-e-learning.html

[3] You can see the full wiki on my labspace, at the address above.

[4] You can see some examples of professionally created podcasts at the Open University Open Politics site: http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/whats-on/open-politics

[5] Try http://www.seabreezecomputers.com/tips/freemusic.htm for a list of free music that you can use