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Changing the role of tutors

in distance education with information and communication technologies

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The Open University plans to make more extensive use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for distance teaching and learning and for administrative contacts between students, tutors and the University's headquarters. This paper reports on a survey of the Tuition and Counselling (TAC) staff, most of whom work only part-time for the OU. It established the extent to which TAC staff currently have access to and familiarity with ICTs and their perceived needs for training and other forms of support for its effective use. The paper discusses the possible impact on TAC staff of the greater use of new technologies in their OU work, and the organisational and pedagogic changes that may ensue.

Introduction

The Open University (OU) is a large, complex organization offering many types of course to a wide variety of adult learners. At the time of writing (1995), the university has over 200,000 distance learners, of whom more than 100,000 are taking undergraduate courses. The OU offers more than 140 undergraduate courses and many other courses in Health and Social Welfare, Management, Community Education, etc. There are about 7,700 Tuition and Counselling (TAC) staff throughout Europe.

Individual members of the TAC staff provide student support as study counsellors and/or tutors for one or more of the OU's courses, and act as a student's local point of contact with the OU. They are usually contracted to work only part-time for the OU, and many are employed full-time or part-time at another university or educational institution.

Within the OU system, there exist only limited opportunities for contact between students and their tutors. Infrequent tutorial sessions provide the main opportunities for face-to-face interaction between tutors and students, although the telephone enables the discussion of problems and queries. Communication by post forms a vital part of OU studies, with assignments being submitted by students for comment and grading by their tutors, who subsequently send back their responses to students.

Since 1988 a small number of courses have involved students and tutors in computer-mediated communication (CMC), and there have also been some small-scale experiments with CMC for students and tutors located in certain 'remote' areas (Mason, 1995a). However, from 1996 there are plans for more widespread access to CMC and other online facilities for those with a modem, etc., and very soon the OU will offer online facilities for administrative purposes.

Access to information and communications technologies

A survey of TAC staff was undertaken in March 1995. Questionnaires were sent to one-third of the TAC staff, with full-time OU staff being excluded from the sample. A total of 2,044 responses were received (78.5% of the sample). When the data were analysed, differences between groups (age, gender, type of course tutored, etc.) were examined (Kirkwood *et al*, 1995). The survey sought to determine:

- the extent of access TAC staff have to information and communications technologies (ICTs);
- the types of equipment available to them and the location;
- their attitudes towards using a computer for their OU work;
- in what ways (if any) they had used a computer for their OU work;
- their perceived needs for support and training in the use of ICTs.

The survey found that, overall, a very large proportion of the TAC staff has access to a computer, with only 12.3% having no access at all. If, however, we consider those who do not tutor courses that *require* students to use a computer, the proportion without access rises to 16.0%. The gender differences in both the quantity and quality of access that we have found with successive student surveys (Jones *et al*, 1992) is repeated in the data for TAC staff, i.e. men have better access than women.

The type of computer most frequently used is a PC with Windows, although there are many using other systems, especially Apple Macintosh and Amstrad PCW machines as well as PCs without Windows. Less than 20% of those with a computer at home have a modem; about the same proportion have a CD-ROM drive. Very many tutors have already used a computer in connection with their OU work, even though only a small number of courses expect tutors to use one.

Many of the survey respondents felt that the OU should provide support for their use of ICTs and not simply in terms of financial assistance to help cover the costs of acquiring hardware or peripherals (a modem, CD-ROM drive, etc.) or of online working. A large proportion felt that they should be trained in the use of software appropriate for their OU work.

Issues for discussion

We believe that the results of the survey raise three issues which are particularly important to the OU, but which also have a wider relevance.

Expected computer literacy and competence

The first of these issues is the level of computer literacy and competence that TAC staff will be

expected, in future, to have. Currently, TAC staff are selected on the basis of subject expertise (i.e. their knowledge and skills related to the subject of the course) and also on their relevant teaching expertise (i.e. their experience and skills of tutoring adult students both face-to-face and at a distance). Knowledge and skills about using computers are necessary only, and indeed relevant only, when tutors are being considered for courses where these form part of the content (e.g. computing or information technology). The issue, therefore, is what the effects will be on recruitment and retention of TAC staff if wider use of computers for OU teaching and administration leads to an expectation of access to ICTs and skills in their use. This is of particular concern if the expectation is applied in respect of courses that do not *require* students to use computers as well as those that do. Might tutors without such skills find themselves disadvantaged even though they fulfil the criteria in terms of subject and teaching expertise? As has been discussed elsewhere (Kirkup and Jones, 1996), there is the real danger that while opening up new possibilities for some, increased use of ICTs closes down possibilities for others – and for TAC staff, as for students, those affected adversely are often groups who are already disadvantaged.

Who gains most from wider use of ICTs by TAC staff?

Does the Open University benefit from the computing knowledge and skills acquired by TAC staff at home or at their main workplace? Do the TAC staff seek to gain experience and skills in their use of ICTs for OU activities that can be transferred to their domestic or main work situation?

Currently, the OU benefits from the general computing competence and skills possessed by TAC staff. However, very many of the tutors with access to a computer feel that they need training in the use of software and applications, ranging from about 20% wanting training for word processing, to more than 50% seeking guidance for email and computer conferencing.

A survey was recently conducted of tutors for the new (1995) OU course *Information Technology and Society* (THD204), which requires students and tutors to use a computer for a number of applications, including CMC and accessing resources on a CD-ROM disc. It found that many hope to increase their IT skills in the process of tutoring the course: 'It appears that many tutors are getting their main training in the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) for teaching through their OU work!' (Kirkup *et al*, 1995, p. 17).

Within the wider context of UK higher education, the adoption and use of ICTs for teaching and learning may be less well developed than many enthusiasts expect. Research on the transformation of higher education in the UK and the role of ICTs (based upon interviews with staff and students in more than 30 universities and colleges) suggests that with the exception of word processing and email (both internally and inter-institutionally) much, if not most, of higher education remains untouched by ICTs (Albury, 1995).

How will the tutor's role change with the increased use of ICTs for OU work?

OU students' overall workload has tended to increase with the introduction of home-based computing as they learn to use the equipment as well as the subject being studied (Jones *et al*, 1992). It is highly likely that TAC staff will experience a similar increase in workload, at least initially.

Currently, the workload for OU tutors tends to be intermittent, in that it is greater when assignments are due and at the time of group tutorials than at other times. If the use of CMC

were introduced more widely, tutors would spend time throughout the year working online, and the workload would tend to be more continuous. The potential for online working and CMC might set up unrealistic student expectations about virtually unlimited levels of contact. As Mason (1995a) has pointed out, increased electronic communication can lead to a particular paradox: it offers the potential for providing more learners with up-to-date information (which could reduce teacher resources); however, it also sets up an expectation of fast personal interactive feedback (which requires more teaching resource). Although students currently have open telephone access to their tutors, social conventions have developed to regulate contact time, for example, no telephone conversations at 1.00 a.m. If tutors are to establish boundaries of the type that exist in telephone contact, and through that reduce their computer-conferencing overload, they need to announce to their students when they will be logging on (Mason, 1995b).

Tutors might have to make additional purchases to achieve the required computer specification, and spend more on telephone costs; both of these will have an impact not only on the domestic budget, but also on the use of shared resources. Tutors are therefore likely to welcome methods of reducing the online costs, both in terms of finance and time.

There are at least two changes to current practice that could achieve such a cost reduction. Firstly, conferencing could be used as a many-to-many delivery system in addition to the more frequently used one-to-many system. Secondly, students could be encouraged to take ownership of the conferencing. Both these changes, however, would require tutor training in conferencing, and would also assume a change in the nature of tutoring such that it would become a blend of course delivery and course support not previously undertaken by OU tutors. One approach, for example, may be for course teams to provide tutors with structured materials guiding tutor conferences which include questions to pose to students at intervals throughout the course. Such training would respond to tutors' expressed needs, and would go some way to solving the electronic communication paradox, and also ensuring that the opening up of possibilities for some is not done entirely at the risk of disadvantaging others.

In conclusion

As the OU moves towards greater use of information and communication technologies for teaching and student support, the role and the needs of the TAC staff (most of whom work only part-time for the OU) must be re-assessed. The issue is not simply one of ensuring that TAC staff have access to appropriate equipment without particular groups being disadvantaged or undue additional expense being incurred by all. The University must enable TAC staff to make effective use of technologies appropriate to their teaching and student support activities. In time, ICTs will not simply replace existing means of delivery and communication: they will make possible different forms of educational interaction. In the case of certain courses or programmes of study, this might involve the generation of new models of distance education, in which current distinctions between established patterns of course production, presentation and student support become untenable.

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