Distance Study with the UK Open University: Views from Russia
(Дистанционное обучение в Открытом Универсетете Великобритании: мнение российских студентов)

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В данной статье рассматриваются результаты исследования мнения студентов МИМ ЛИНК об их опыте дистанционного обучения на программах Открытого Университета Великобритании в России. На основе интервью с 26-ю студентами, преподавателями и сотрудниками МИМ ЛИНК автор анализирует опыт внедрения ИКТ в дистанционное обучение. Основным выводам проекта является необходимость локализации и контекстуализации методического обеспечения программ ДО при их использовании в культурных условиях отличных от учебного заведения, где они были созданы.

1. Introduction and Method

This paper reports on the results of a qualitative stage of a mixed-method study that was conducted by the author of the paper at the International Institute of Management LINK (IIM LINK) in Russia. The focus of the project was on exploring learner experiences of three dimensions of Michael Graham Moore's (1980) theory of transactional distance: dialogue, learner autonomy and course structure and their constitutive constructs – learner-learner, learner-tutor and learner-content dialogue; learner independence and interdependence; rigidity/ flexibility of course structure and the degree of learner control over their studies. The main data collection method was semi-structured interviews that focused on the main theme (learner experiences of transactional distance) and included several related sub-themes, i.e.

- the interviewee's experiences of transactional distance
- ways of decreasing miscommunication between distance learners and tutors

- the role of e-mail, online conferencing and other forms of electronic communication n interpersonal communication
- the role of a face-to-face component in reducing transactional distance
- the impact of language differences, different approaches to distance teaching and learning.

The sequence of questions and the degree of probing and prompting depended on the flow of conversation and the importance that the individual participants attached to different aspects of their experience of distance learning.

2. Study Context and Interview Sample

IIM LINK is the exclusive partner of the UK Open University in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. It was formed as a distance learning centre in 1992 in the town of Zhukovsky, about 23 kilometres south-east of Moscow, by a group of researchers at the Central Aerohydrodynamic Institute (TsAGI), the leading research institute in the field of aerohydrodynamics (IIM LINK website, 2009). The UK Open University is a purely distance learning institution that was established in 1969 and with around 200 000 students is the largest university in the United Kingdom in terms of student enrolment (OU website, 2009).

All of the participants in this study were recruited from two of the Open University programmes taught in Russia – The Professional Certificate (BZR630) and The Professional Diploma in Management (BZR700). The Professional Certificate in Management was an entry-level course for students with or without management experience. The course could be studied as one 12-month course or as a series of 6 modules with four study blocks (Open University Courses and Qualifications website, 2009). The Professional Diploma in Management is a 60-point postgraduate level course studied over 12 months with presentations beginning in May and November each year. The programme is aimed at management professionals, but is seen as being particularly relevant to individuals with positions in middle or senior management (The Professional Diploma in Management Study Guide, 2003).

The sample of the study included 26 participants who studied with IIM LINK in various locations across Russia. In total 23 interviews were conducted face-to-face and three electronically by e-mail. 16 of the respondents were students; eight were

tutors and five course team members or regional centre directors. In three cases the respondents assumed more than one role and were either both a student and director of the regional centre or a tutor and a course team member.

3. Results

The process of data analysis followed what is described by Thomas (2005) as "the general inductive approach" to data analysis, where key themes in the data are identified without the constraints of existing conceptual frameworks. In general, the themes that emerged in the participants' responses might be classified as deductive (i.e. those that were linked to the themes in the interview schedule) or inductive (the emerging themes, that respondents brought themselves up). The key deductive themes were a) gaining and maintaining momentum in online discussions; b) transcending the boundaries of a particular geographical region or professional context through online interaction c) cultural specificity of online discourse

3.1 Deductive Themes – Challenges and Strengths of Online Communication

The problem of how to properly set up and run online conferences and maintaining momentum at crucial points remained central for both tutors and students interviewed in this study. Vladimir is an experienced IT manager, who had significant experience of online work and took both BZR630 and BZR700, but found the experience of online interaction quite daunting. As some other students, he saw the lack of input to online discussions as a typically Russian characteristic.

> *Vladimir:* … maybe it's our mentality or something else that prevents us from interacting in the TGA. I remember we had a problem with that at the Certificate level, I remember it now and neither the tutors, nor the system as a whole can get us to access TGA more often. It's easy for me, because I've worked with the Internet all my life. But I can see that for many other people it's some sort of a barrier, i.e. people don't write long texts, they restrict themselves to some short phrases, the communication fades away after one or two steps.

Both BZR630 and BZR700 students viewed course- and module-specific conferences as important learning resources, which brought them together to participate in discussions and exchange their experiences with colleagues. Access to these discussions seemed particularly important for learners studying outside big metropolitan areas where student numbers were relatively low. One of the most salient themes in their responses was the notion of *"transcending"* the constraints of their work settings to broaden their outlook and expand the network of professional contacts. Vladislav, a BZR700 student and a tutor on BZR630, described the usefulness of nationwide course- and module-specific conferences for his professional practice.

> *Vladislav:* In my view, the greatest benefit of study with the Open University is the fact that you can use a very big database of successful students in Russia and abroad. Effectively a well-defined problem will find a response in the minds of competent managers from all over Russia, because there's a lot of information, a lot of advice in the general conference. It's kind of a global database and there are no questions which cannot be solved together.

One other re-occurring characteristics of online discourse was its lack of informality and the inability to establish strong rapport with other students. Electronic conferencing contributed to maintaining existing relations or professional contacts, but the nature of online exchange was seen as too formal, lacking visual cues and other important features of the context. Thus online discussions were largely seen as an addition, but not a replacement for face-to-face communication. Arkady, a BZR700 student enrolled with one of the Moscow centres, argued that the lack of informality in online discourse was a serious impediment to effective communication online.

> *Arkady:* The relations are FOR-MAL. You don't see the eyes of the person you're talking to. For example I see [name of the tutor] and when I read his message, I can see his face behind it and I perceive it in a different way, because I know him. And it is perceived with certain important contextual information.

3.2 Inductive Themes – Open University Studies in the Russian   Context

Although the qualitative part of the present study was focused on identifying patterns in the participants' views on transactional distance, the themes that emerged in the participants' accounts provided insights into aspects of distance teaching and learning which were important to them. They also helped to investigate the nature of the difficulties that learners experience in online and blended learning environments. The two emerging themes that appeared to be most salient in the learners' accounts were a) lack of clarity on the status of the Open University degree in the context of Russian education and b) difficulties in adjusting to a different teaching and learning model when studying with the Open University.

For the majority of students the fact that they were studying for the UK Open University qualifications in Russia was both an achievement and cause for concern. Most students claimed that the Open University studies were viewed as an important step in their professional development. However, what worried them was how the qualifications that they aimed to gain would be perceived by their future employers, as the status of Open University credentials in a different cultural and educational context seemed to be rather ambiguous. Zhanna, a BZR700 student, described the difficulties of distance study with a British institution in the context where the management did not have a clear idea of the importance of UK qualifications.

> *Zhanna:* … having gained competences, you return into your own organisational environment, where you are the only student and you consequently start to speak in a different language. The problem becomes particularly serious when the superiors do not share your views and approaches – like it is the case with me – and are not loyal customers to this type of education. And in this sense there are many problems including those of psychological character.

Another challenging aspect of distance teaching and learning in the Russian context was the Open University's approach to distance education, which for most of the learners was new. All of the respondents had previously completed their first degrees and compared their previous experiences with the new type of learning, but the true nature of distance education according to the Open University model was difficult to grasp for many potential or even present students. The learners saw distance education programmes as a trade-off between more traditional educational

forms and purely online independent study. Viktor, one of the senior LINK managers, discussed this problem in more detail.

> *Viktor:* Quite a large number of students don't really try to go into details of what distance education is about and what elements it includes. [The would ask] just "How many face-to-face meetings have you got?" So, if there are few face-to-face meetings, it's bad, it's *zaochka* [*zaochnoe* education], if there are too many of them, then it is difficult and does not suit them now, but when it's something in between, that's about right.

Many of the Russian students compared distance education with *zaochnoe* education (although only one of the respondents had the experience of a *zaochnoe* programme himself) and were usually openly critical of it, which might be part of the reason why they had opted for doing a distance-education course in the end. For some students this lack of clarity on the nature of distance study was an additional challenge, particularly in the first few weeks and months of the course when they had to make sense of the course materials on their own. Andrey, a BZR630 student, argued that it was the lack of understanding of the nature of distance education and the negative reputation of *zaochnoe* education which caused most problems in the first few weeks of the course.

> *Andrey:* I had a psychological barrier in the sense that I did not know what the process of learning at LINK was about; I was guided by the notion of *zaochnoe* education in our Russian higher educational institutions. So, first of all, it's quality. It's not a secret that *zaochnoe* education is not held in much esteem by Russian employers, and before being enrolled on a course of study I had this psychological barrier.

He went on to describe his bewilderment at the amount of learning materials that he received in the beginning of the study along with the week-by-week course timetable, which caused doubts as to how efficient the process of distance education would turn out to be.

> *Interviewer:* Could you recall what specifically caused problems in the initial period of study?

Andrey: Well, first of all the visual material itself was quite unusual – videotapes, audiotapes and this course calendar, which required studying the material according to the specific schedule, caused doubts about the efficiency of this sort of education.

Lyudmila, a BZR30 student, had similar problems despite having completed two degrees in Russia before starting a study with the Open University. Both the nature of the subject matter and the ways in which it was organised caused significant difficulties and it was only the positive experience of the first two tutorials and TMAs which helped her stay on the course and get on with the rest of her studies.

Lyudmila: Well, I think the most difficult point of study was the beginning, because for me, when you already have two degrees, I almost wished that I had not got involved into this. On the one hand, it was very basic, but I could not make sense of it all … I did not fully understand the practical usefulness of it; it was more like stating the facts, which were not related to another. Then some sort of understanding came after a few tutorials and two TMAs.

4. Conclusions

The results of the present can hardly be conclusive due to small sample sizes for both courses and reliance on qualitative research methods. While quantitative results and the results of cross-cultural comparisons are discussed elsewhere (e.g. see Ramanau, 2006 and 2007), the results of analysing interviews with Russian students have some implications for running international distance education.

First, the results of this study make it plausible to suggest that the attitudes to Web-based interaction are often shared among the members of a particular cultural group and thus can make an impact on the nature of online communication. In fact, one might look at the notion of a cultural group beyond the constraints of national cultures and include for example cross-sector professional differences, which might also be important determinants of online behaviour. Consequently when new distance teaching and learning technologies are introduced in a new cultural context the attitudes towards the proliferation of these tools in this context should be considered

along with purely technical issues of ensuring sufficient access and providing adequate IT skills training.

Second, the wider educational and social milieu proved to be a backdrop against which the groups of students under study described their distance learning experience. The lack of tradition of study with the foreign university in Russia in general and of distance study as a whole seemed to be quite salient in the participants' responses. In line with Santos' (2008) analysis of the use of OERs (Open Educational Resources) distance teaching and learning materials have to be contextualised within a particular national or local context. Thus, global online learning initiatives might not only consider the educational traditions of a particular country, but also the nature of the learners' work contexts in the design and delivery of their programmes.

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