Supportive social networks: Community-based learner support in online learning

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Overview

Drawing from the findings of a wider study into the role and function of online social presence and its (potential) relationship with learner support in text-based online learning environments, this poster highlights key findings related to social aspects of learner support in text-based online learning environments and, in particular, community based model for learner support.

Background

Broadly, learner support includes "*all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process*" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 108, emphasis in the original). Learner support in this context refers to "meeting the needs that all learners have because they are central to high quality learning" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 107).

Originally associated with distance education, the concept of learner support is gaining currency in many educational contexts. Increasing attention on lifelong learning has resulted in changed demographics in higher and further education (Ryan, 2001). Constructivist pedagogical approaches and the related learner centeredness have refocused the design and implementation of learning programs on the learner experience (Jona, 2000; Mayes, 2004). Furthermore, the *marketisation* of education has changed the dynamics of the institution--student relationship and necessitated a reconsideration of the status of learners as consumers or clients (Tait, 2000). Together, these forces have emphasised the role of learner support in increasing the satisfaction, retention and success of learners. Simply put, learner support adds value for learners. It addresses their needs and empowers them to create learning experiences which are more personally meaningful, more relevant and more productive. Education has become a service industry and learner support is a key component of that service.

However, the notion of support is not new to education. McLoughlin (2002) points out that teaching has always had a supportive dimension. It is clear that not all learners are willing or able to successfully complete activities that lead to learning. They need support (Laurillard, 2002). This is particularly true in online education, which introduces a number of potentially unfamiliar conditions to formal education, including: (a) the focus on learner centeredness and the implied role changes for learners; (b) the physical distance between learners and the resulting reliance on mediated interactions; (c) the use of potentially unfamiliar technologies; and (d) the particular pedagogical approaches which emphasise collaborative process over individual ones and highlight concerns over learning skills and equitable social practice. Therefore learner support in online education merits particular attention.

Online learner support

The convergence of distance and face-to-face education (Mason & Kaye, 1990), and the development of online and networked delivery systems, have led to a re-conceptualisation of learner support and its place in educational programs which employ technology (Thorpe, 2002). As Kimball (2001) points out, rather than trying to "make up for" particular perceived shortcomings in distance programs, faculty members are successful with those programs when they view them as providing some qualitative advantages. With emphasis on community, connection, and interaction, learner support in online learning has shifted away from a systems-based industrial model of support to a learner-centred view which is consistent with the constructivist and other socially situated pedagogies that feature prominently in online learning. Online learning provides support in the workings of networks of individual social actors which function as online learning communities. These systems place greater responsibility for learner support in the hands of participants in the learning community. Moreover, they leverage the power of networked communications and computing technology to provide a powerful combination of supportive community infrastructure and

a responsive peer group. Thorpe (2002) highlights the fundamentals of support in online learning: "Learner support is essentially about roles, structures and environments: support roles and supportive people, together with support structures and supportive environments" (p. 110).

Key findings

The poster provides a visual comparison of three models of learner support: The first two are adapted from Thorpe (2002) and depict a second-generation distance education model and a third-generation distance education (see Nipper, 1989). The third is drawn from a study into the role and function of online social presence and its relationship with learner support. This is a community-based support model which emphasises social aspects of learner support and the affordances of networked infrastructure to connect online learners to a supportive community. This community learner support model has significant implications for the design and development of community based online learning systems. In addition to attention to (a) technological aspects of design which create functional, user-friendly environments and (b) pedagogical concerns such as an emphasis on learning as a participative social activity in a rich, authentic context, designers who wish to employ community models of learner support also need to develop consideration of (c) support in terms of both static and dynamic support structures which meet learners' needs and (d) community structure and function in the creation of vibrant communities.

The comparison between the three learner support models seeks to invite discussion on the relationships between various parts of the model(s), including: static and dynamic course content, the roles of participants, social aspects of learning processes and the supportive infrastructure of various learning designs.

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