SEEKING PERSEVERANCE THROUGH CLOSER RELATIONS WITH REMOTE STUDENTS

Christopher Morgan
Faculty of Rural Management
The University of Sydney, Australia
cmorgan@orange.usyd.edu.au

Abstract

The application of communications technologies for educational purposes has provided opportunities for academics to enhance their relationship with their distance education students. This paper provides an interim report on the outcomes of a deliberate strategy by an academic to make use of technology to build rapport with his students and to monitor their progress and performance. The preliminary findings from this particular case study have wider applicability in that they suggest that students are more likely to complete their studies if they have a sense of commitment to others with whom they have bonded throughout the course of their learning experience.

Introduction

Despite the best efforts of institutions to retain students in their courses, the part-time students at a distance remain more likely to leave their courses than their full-time on-campus counterparts (Morgan & Littlewood, 1998). This is not surprising as there are several important differences between the two groups, all of which weigh heavily against the distance students continuing with their studies. These factors are well known and include realities such as students at a distance being far more likely to have compelling family, employment and community responsibilities than their full-time on-campus counterparts. As a result their personal priorities will be different and allocating time to studies relatively more difficult.

While teaching staff and their institutions can do little about some of these factors, there are aspects of the climate in which the distance learner operates that can be influenced. Individual students make a personal decision to persist or not to persist in their course through weighing the positives and negatives operating within their particular context. The personal decision each student makes in this regard involves the interplay of positive factors which encourage them to continue and negative factors which push them towards withdrawal. Thus for those on the point of withdrawal, the decision whether or not to persist can be affected by even a slight tip in favour of the positive side of the experience as a result of efforts expended by the institution.

The Value of Affiliation

The quality of the distance education experience suffers in comparison with its on-campus equivalent due to issues of affiliation, status, recognition and empowerment (Mahony & Morgan, 1991). Being a distance student is more likely to bring with it feelings of isolation, little sense of being part of the learning community, and a sense of unreality. Such students may see themselves as lone individuals, of lower status and lesser importance within the university community. This can reduce their pride in being a tertiary student, their sense of affiliation with other students and

their institution and its staff, and their commitment to persevere. The weakness of these bonds of the student to the institution and to the community of learning immediately increases their propensity to dropout.

The building of a sense of affiliation among their distance learners must then present fertile opportunities for providers. It seems reasonable to expect that if institutions and individual tutors gained improvement in this area then higher completion rates could well be a reward. Initiatives in this area could tip the balance more towards persisting with their studies for some students who may be hovering on the brink of withdrawal. Those not so much at risk of withdrawal can be expected to sense a benefit from an elevated quality of their educational experience.

The Project

A small project was implemented among students at a distance in a financial management unit of study at the Orange campus of the University of Sydney in a deliberate attempt to improve the quality of their learning experience through building a greater sense of community and affiliation. The strategic use of the WebCT platform that had become available offered the lecturer the opportunity to interact with students in an ongoing manner. This was viewed as an opportunity to provide the factors necessary for high quality support for distance learners as cited by Cowan (1994), that is, timely prompting, encouragement and facilitative interventions.

The regular distance presentation utilising printed study materials was supplemented by the use of the WebCT platform. While this supplementation was made available to all students only a minority were able or chose to make use of it. In the first year only 11 of the 51 enrolling students participated and in the second 15 of the 59.

Studies, such as that by Wood (1995), have shown that students are often keen to receive electronic messages but less willing to initiate them to others. As the lecturer's purpose was to make use of the technology to build a sense of community among the participating students, it was important that all felt comfortable about using it. In an attempt to "break the ice" all participating students were asked to prepare and electronically submit to the group their own short informal profile. Those who did not respond were individually contacted by email and further encouraged to do so. This prompting continued until everyone had complied, including the lecturer. This early activity had an added benefit for some as it served to ease their anxieties regarding the use of an unfamiliar technology.

The lecturer anticipated that email traffic initiated by students would be light. As Bielema (1997) reports, it is essential for the tutor to be prepared to intervene and revitalise electronic discussions as the exchanges wane. If there were to be a low level of email traffic then it was expected that little sense of community would develop among the group. Consequently the lecturer made a personal undertaking to initiate a considerable degree of contact using this medium with both the group and individual students in the group.

The lecturer regularly sent group messages throughout the semester when the unit was on offer and generated on average one such message each week. The nature of these varied and messages included matters such as requests of students to respond with details of their study progress, general items of news around the campus and in the life of the lecturer, notification when the lecturer would be away from the office and difficult to contact, and progressive assessment performance details over the whole unit so that individuals could monitor their own performance against the total enrolment. The tone of all messages was conversational and students were encouraged to send their own group messages.

Each time students responded to a group message or else initiated one themselves, the lecturer sent them an individual encouraging response to ensure they registered that their contribution was received and appreciated. When students did not reply having been requested to do so in a group message, then these students would be followed up by email on an individual basis until they did

reply. Additionally the lecturer initiated enquiry messages to individual students when they were later than expected in submitting their assessment items or when he had not heard from them for a while. He would also send personalised messages of encouragement to students who had done particularly well or particularly poorly with their assessable work.

Other facilities available through the WebCT platform were utilised such as asynchronous forum discussions whereby challenge questions were posed, synchronous chat sessions, models and links. The thrust of the project however was to have frequent, regular, personalised interactions between the lecturer and the student. Some management features were:
- The lecturer assigning this task sufficient priority to enable the checking of the site at least twice each day. Rapid response was regarded as a quality issue in this project.
- Monitoring of visits to the site to enable identification of students who had not been in contact for some time. These students would be sent a personalised message by the lecturer either enquiring about some aspect of their study progress or following up on a previous interaction.

Student Impressions

At the end of the semester, an independent third party evaluated each of the participating student's experiences. Students in both offerings overwhelmingly responded that they enjoyed the interactions with their lecturer and looked forward to them. They acknowledged the relatively low level of interaction between students but were not particularly concerned about this.

Of particular interest is the fact that the students found their interactions with their lecturer motivating. They commented that because of the relationship they had developed with their lecturer they made time for study when they did not think they had any available. They said that the regular contact kept them on task and helped them maintain study as a high priority among competing obligations.

Students again responded positively when asked whether or not the online interactions contributed to their sense of affiliation. Comments included the removal of the loneliness associated with feeling isolated and the sense of belonging to a learning community with other students and staff close at hand.

Effectiveness of the Intervention

The survey of students clearly revealed that they felt they mattered to the lecturer, benefited from his intervention, and considered their bonds with the institution were strengthened. Quite clearly the quality of the distance education experience for these students was elevated.

In terms of the effect on persistence, the low numbers of students involved does not lend itself well to formal statistical analysis. Nevertheless some interesting observations can be made. In the first offering 80% of those students in the unit not participating in the online supplementation completed the unit. By way of comparison, all eleven students in the online group completed. Of these, two volunteered the opinion that they would have been unlikely to persist had it not been for the regular communication they received. In the second offering 13 of the fifteen students (87%) participating in the online component completed while only 71% of the others completed.

Two comments by students in the course of the first presentation highlight the impact of the affiliation that developed among the participants. The first comment came to the lecturer half way through the semester and indicates the sense of duty that arises when a union between the student and lecturer develops:

> *I feel obliged to get my first assignment done and handed into you because we have been corresponding so regularly...in my case it has given me the motivation to get this far.*

The second is a reflective comment sent by one student to the whole group upon her completion of the unit and attests to the need students have to be part of a learning community:

> *I must say that this unit is the best I've studied...particularly because of our tutorial group which prevented a feeling of being alone out here with no idea even that anyone else was doing the same unit.*

Conclusions

The regular, personable and committed use of communication technologies with those studying at a distance can build positive relationships. This approach is clearly of value for students who avail themselves of it and rewarding for staff who enjoy the challenges that teaching in a distance learning environment at university brings. An outcome of having more satisfied students for the university is that it can lead to stronger student/university bonds with its consequent advantages. It also appears that the social bonding that can develop between students and staff, and to a lesser extent between students, may lead to higher completion rates. By taking a personalised approach using the technology, the academic can be involved with each student and have a positive effect on study activity and perseverance.

The demands on staff choosing this approach are significant and it requires of them a sustained, regular and sensitive commitment. Unless the staff member is prepared to make such a commitment then it is unlikely that the potential the technology offers will be realised. As Rocklin (2001) points out within this context, university teachers are unlikely to be able devote a lot more effort to their teaching than they already do. Thus the realities of contemporary academic workloads will likely limit the capacity of the lecturer to provide the commitment required for learning enhancements such as this.

References

Bielema, C.L. (1997). How computer-mediated communication can work to enhance distance delivery of courses. *Journal of Applied Communications*, *81* (4), 3-17.

Cowan, J. (1994). How can you assure quality in my support, as a distance learner? *Open Learning*, *February*, 59-62.

Mahony, M.J. & Morgan, C.K. (1991). A sense of belonging: The unacknowledged dimension of quality in distance education. In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath & D. Meacham (Eds.), *Quality in Distance Education*, ASPESA Forum 91, Australian & South Pacific External Studies Association.

Morgan, C.K. & Littlewood, J. (1998). Missing persons: The case of the disappearing students. In B. Cranston (Ed.), *Distance Education: Past, Present and Future*, (pp. 149-153). National Organisation for Distance Education Students, Central Queensland University Publishing Unit, Nth Rockhampton.

Rocklin, T. (2001). Do I dare? Is it Prudent? *National Teaching and Learning Forum Newsletter*, *10* (3). Oryx Press.

Wood, J.A. (1995). Work in progress at the virtual Monash: The development of online learning across the University and beyond, *Active Learning*, *1* (2), 13-18.