STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING SUPPORT IN A TUTORIAL SESSION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

Distance education is a learner-centred system that emphasises independent learning based on the assumption that students would be self-motivated and active in the learning process. However, due to the fact that the distance education students study alone most of the time there is a need to enhance the learning experience by providing support structures such as high quality learning material, interaction with other students and the tutors in supporting learning. The University of Pretoria like many other institutions, offers face-to-face tutorial sessions to facilitate learning in addition to contact sessions and interaction with learning materials. Although students attending the session do provide feedback of the session in form of short questionnaires there is need to further explore their experiences using qualitative approach to capture nuances of how the students and tutors experience and conceptualize learning support in a face-to-face tutorial session and whether they think it is worthwhile attending the sessions. The data was collected from interviewing students enrolled for Advance Certificate in Education at the Distance Education Unit, University of Pretoria and their tutors. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The findings from the study will be reported and recommendations will be made to improve the tutorial programme design and the support structure.

Key words: Distance Education; students’ expectation; tutorial support; role of tutors; peer support.
Introduction

Many public and private institutions offer distance education courses for students to work with course material and postal communications through electronic media, face-to-face tutoring, mentoring, email correspondence or via telephone (Sherry, 1996). It has been argued that students studying independently, but receiving periodic contact from support staff as well as feedback and instructions from their supervisors are more likely to feel a bound with their institution than on campus students (Beaudoin, 1990). However, different students have different learning styles. Some may need support and guidance more than others depending on their learning styles. Carnwell (2000) describes that different learning styles as systematic wading, speedy-focusing and global dipping. In his study, learners who were systematic waders engaged actively and systematically with their study material and depended less on tutor support and guidance. The speedy-focusing students although they also depend less on tutors tend to take short-cuts in their study by focusing only on what is required for the assignment or test as a result limited deep learning takes place unlike systematic waders who experience deep learning. The third group, global dippers are surface learners who study in a disorganized way, encounter difficulties with the learning material and may need more learning support.

Learner support is a system that enables learners to access a variety of learning resources such as learning materials, library, media technology and tutors as facilitators (Garrison & Baynton, 1987). Some distance education students may need learning support structure to enhance and improve their ability to be independent learners, have learning skills, strategies and be able to interact with tutors, learning material and other students (Dzakiria, 2008). The need for tutor support may be determined by the type of learning styles and the stage of the student’s study. Students at early stages of their study may need
more tutor support and at a later stage more peer support, social integration and networking takes precedence (Brigley & Kell, 2007)

Tutorial sessions are learner support systems where learner engages with the learning materials and teacher/facilitator (Garrison & Baynton, 1987). An action research studies with Open University students in the United Kingdom showed that students come to distance education with expectations of support services from the tutors and students’ satisfaction with tutor support increases course completion rate and reduces student dropout (Stevenson, MacKeogh & Sander, 2006). In a related study, student and tutor perception of effective tutoring in distance education revealed that students and tutors conceptualize effective tutoring in different ways (Jelf, Richardson & Price, 2009). Students related effective tutoring to subject expertise, development of critical thinking and interaction with other students which is more tasks oriented. While, the tutors perceived good tutoring as the ability to facilitate transmission of knowledge and supporting learning which is more student oriented. The study recommended that both students and tutors should appreciate the importance of support in facilitating learning wether task or student oriented.

Face –to- face learner support in distance education can be seen as scaffolding, a term described as effective intervention by a peer or other competent person in the learning and optimum development of potential in a learner ( Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). A variety of activities is involved in the learning process such as offering explanations, encouraging students to participate actively, verifying and clarifying student understanding, generating questions and comments and modeling of desired behaviour (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). Such learning support can be achieved by establishing contact with the students in a tutorial session.

A study done in the open University of Hong Kong (Fung & Carr, 2000) explored the factors that contribute to successful tutorials revealed that the data collected
at an earlier stage of the research indicated that students expected the tutors to lecture them and help them understand the course better in order to improve their academic achievement. However, as they continued with their studies and realized that their expectations were being met, the students indicated a need for interaction with their peers. In an earlier research (Sherry, 1990) indicated that the most important factor for successful distance learning is the ability of the teacher to be caring, confident, experienced creative and interactive with the students. The support that the student receives may overcome the feeling of disconnection with the educational institution during the self-study period. This study contributes to the knowledge on the field of distance education by exploring the experiences of students and tutors in a tutorial session.

**Context of the study**

The University of Pretoria offers Distance Education Programme in Advance Certificate in Education (ACE) and a Bachelor of Education degree programme to individuals mostly teachers in service who want to upgrade their qualifications and improve conditions at their schools by becoming better education managers. The Advance Certificate in Education programme consists of six modules. Each module addresses a different aspect of education management such as Organization management, Education management, Professional and social context of education and Education law.

In 2008 the University of Pretoria introduced a structure on a pilot basis where tutors conduct tutorials for students in the ACE: Education Management programme (Distance Education Programme, Admin Booklet 2010). The tutorial sessions approach is based on constructivist paradigm. The facilitator/tutor is not the sole constructor of knowledge but guides and interacts with students in constructing knowledge or new theory. The tutor and student interaction takes place during face-to-face tutorial sessions.
Although literature suggest a paradigm shift from the traditional learning support structures to technological bound media (Lawton, 1997; Zhang, Perris & Yeung, 2005; Alonso & Blazquez, 2009) there are distance education students in many societies that still depend on traditional ways of learning support mostly in where new technologies are absent or used minimally (Tait, 2000). Most of the students enrolled in Distance Education with the University of Pretoria are living in remote and rural areas where there is no electricity and other resources to facilitate the use of technological innovation in learning. The students rely on traditional face to face instruction. Which takes place through contact lecturing sessions and tutorial sessions.

The Distance Education Unit has more than 15 tutorial venues in different provinces where local tutors have been identified and trained to facilitate the sessions. The students have to register for the tutorial sessions for each of the four tutorial sessions in a cycle (November to March) and another cycle (May to September). Examination is written in April and October. The tutorial sessions are integrated into the course and students are encouraged to work in groups and build up peer support learning. Each tutorial session last 4 hours and covers 25% of the work.
The different components of the learning support given to distance education student (ACE: Education Management) at University of Pretoria are shown in figure 1. The components are interlaced and used simultaneously during the tutorial session. For successful distance education learning to take place there has to be interactivity between the tutor and the student, between the student and the course material and active learning through interaction with peers.

Peer support that takes place through discussions enables the students to share ideas, review ideas and provide feedback (McConnell, 2000). The students not only gain new knowledge but also acquire new social skills through communication and collaboration with their peers (Sherry, 1996). Through peer
support some student are able to share advice and common experiences of the challenges of distance learning (Cain et al, 2003). Learning support during the tutorial session for ACE (Education Management) mostly takes place in form of peer support that enables the students to engage critically in exploring and evaluating their own school situation in the process of knowledge construction. Students work in groups of four to six discussing and working through the activities provided in the worksheets. Information can be shared through group discussions and ideas reviewed through feedback among peers (McConnell, 2000). The support the students get from each other in group discussions reduces the feeling of isolation and loneliness experienced by some distance education students (Dzakiria, 2008) and is important for networking (Lawton, 1997).

For distance learning, the study materials such as learning guides, tutorial worksheets and readers are designed such that the content and structure are suitable for independent study (Beaudoin, 1990). The content and structure allows the students to participate actively in learning. Willis (1993) suggests that the study materials should be designed to optimize content and space, and be suitable for different student learning style. Use of case studies and examples that are relevant to the target audience make the course more meaningful to the students as education managers. In the Advance Certificate in Education Programme, the learning guides contain the structure and content of the course. The guide also contain exercises and activities that should be completed by the student during self study or when working in groups. The work sheets is designed to provide scenarios and case studies for the students to reflect on and apply what they have learnt in real life situations. The reader contains a number of articles and research literature related to specific modules. The readings are provided to stimulate students and make them think critically on issues related to the modules and practical application of different management theories.
The role of the tutor is mostly to facilitate group discussions using tutorial worksheet developed by the university lecture based on the subject content of different core modules. Brigley and Kell (2007) found that, the role of the tutor was to help students make sense of the course material, integrate the acquired knowledge with educational practice and self-develop as educators. In order to facilitating learning, the tutor should be knowledgeable about the subject and prepare in advance before the session. The tutor should be able to refer students to other sources of support (Lawton, 1997 & Sherry, 1997). Fung and Carr (2000) reported that students perceived tutor support as enrichment in understanding course material and guidance in doing assignments especially tutors who were interesting, helpful and able to express themselves clearly.

There are studies that have revealed that students attend tutorials to listen to the tutors explaining course material and providing guidance in doing assignments and not necessarily facilitation of students interaction (Fung & Carr, 2000). It would seem that for such cases the role of the tutor should be to assist the learners in making sense of the course content and integrating knowledge into practice (Brigley and Kell, 2007). In contrast, Beaudoin (1990) described the role of the tutor as a facilitator rather than a lecturer/teacher because self-directed learning empowers learners and reduces their dependency on the tutor traditional role of lecturing. The role of the tutor in the context of this study is to facilitate group discussion and not necessarily subject expert.

Purpose of this study is to explore the students’ and the tutors views and opinions of the integrated support components in a tutorial session to identify the students’ needs in terms of learner support and recommend strategies of improving the tutorial sessions. This study also intends to illuminate the conception of students and tutors of tutorial session and their expectations since there could be discrepancy between the intentions of tutorials and student expectations of the sessions (Fung & Carr, 2000). The understanding of the experiences of students of the tutorial sessions may enable the tutors and
programme coordinated to make changes that could enhance tutorial sessions as a learning support structure for distance education students.

**Research Methodology**

This study design is based on an interpretive paradigm in qualitative approach. We are assuming that to understand the world of distance education students we have to explore their lived experiences and the realities of their everyday life. The subjective knowledge of the participants’ experiences was gathered through semi interviews. The participants in the study were six students and four tutors who volunteered to be interviewed after the tutorial session. All the participants were distance education students enrolled in the Advance Certificate in Education (ACE) Education Management attending tutorial sessions. The participants were from different age groups, different ethnic backgrounds and teaching in primary or secondary schools. The interviews were used as a data collection method to explore the tutorial needs of the students, their experiences and concerns by talking to them. All the interviews took place at the tutorial venues after the tutorial session and lasted for about 25 minutes each. All the interviews were audio taped with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim.

To gain knowledge and better understanding of the current tutorial structures as learning support for distance education students the following questions were asked:

1. What can you say about tutorial sessions?
2. What is your role and expectations in a tutorial session?
3. What kind of support do you receive in a tutorial session?
4. What are the challenges?

The analysis of the data from the interviews was done in terms of the themes from the interview questions. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, triangulation was done by means of different data sources. Interviews from
students and the tutors were checked against each other to determine the
difference and similarities of their experiences and expectations. Peer
triangulation enabled the two researchers to compare transcript codes, emerging
patterns and themes. Recommendations were made from the finding on how the
tutorial sessions may be improved.

Delimitations
This study was limited to two tutorial venues Polokwane and Mokopane. We
interviewed six students and four tutors, each participant once. The study was
confined to students doing (ACE) Education Management.

Findings
Four major findings emerged from the interviews. The first theme was
appreciation for the clarification of the subject content and motivation to study
after attending the sessions. There also a strong awareness of the importance of
collaborative learning through peer supports. The second finding was the
different ways in which the role of the tutor was comprehend by the tutors and
the students. The third finding was the nature and importance of the support that
students get from tutorial sessions. The fourth findings were that both students
and tutors place administrative problems as their main challenges in a tutorial
session.

Finding 1

_Experiences of a tutorial session_

Tutorial sessions were perceived by all students as a useful support structure
that provided them with opportunity to better understand the course material
through interaction with other students and sharing of ideas to motivate and keep
them on track with their studies . They commented that:
You know it is difficult to study by yourself at home and sometimes you relax but after attending the tutorial session it is like I have been recharged and as I go home I can go on for a week studying very seriously trying to consolidate what I gained from the tutorial sessions (student 3).

Sometimes when you are alone you pretend to know certain things only to find that you are answering them in a wrong way (student 2).

Some students felt that it was important for them to participate in group discussions during the tutorial session:

*I think that it is important for me to participate in the discussions during the sessions, to share ideas and listen to each other’s opinion (Student 1)*

*I think my role in a tutorial session is to participate in order to help the tutor to try to understand us. If I participate I contribute a lot to the tutorial (Student 4).*

The tutorial sessions were perceived by some of the students as a chance for self development and life long learning. The knowledge gained and experience seems to have more meaning to the students beyond the scope of the exam:

*I would recommend that they attend the sessions. I would tell them that this is not only for the exams, but lifelong learning even after passing the exams you will apply it in life. It can even help you to become a better person outside your working environment (Student 3).*

Another student highlighted:

*I feel that if I miss one tutorial session. I would have missed something that I would have applied in the weeks to come. What I gain here I can practically apply in our school even before I write the exam (Student 2).*

It seems that there is mutual benefit between the tutors and the students with regard to tutorial session as an opportunity to learn from each other. The tutors also felt motivated when the students appreciated their support after passing the exams.
I may be a tutor but there is somebody with more experience which can help me. Being a tutor I gain more from the students (Tutor 1)

The students come to me telling me that they have passed. I have never received information from the students who have failed. I do not know if they are shy or not but the ones who have passed say thank you (Tutor 4).

After getting their results in December last year, they came to me and praised me for helping them. They tried to give me some presents. I was very happy. I was not sure if what I was doing was helping them. This thing I do whole heartedly (Tutor 2).

Finding 2

Expectations and roles played during a tutorial session
Initially some students expected the tutors to teach them during the tutorial session. They later realized that the role of the tutor is to facilitate, guide and monitor their discussions and not necessarily to teach them:

I expected them to give us answers but now it's not like that. We break into groups and we interrogate certain aspects in the guide. We ask questions and learn from each other. After the discussion you feel that there is no need for a tutor to give you answers (student 3).

Some students expected the tutor to play a dual role of facilitation and teaching. The following excerpts from a student express their feelings:

I want to see a situation when we have a problem. I am not saying that the tutor should be an expert but in one way or another tutor should give clarification. I have attended many tutorial sessions and when we encounter problems the tutor will refer the question back to us even if the entire class does not know the answer to the question. So the situation should be that a tutor is more equipped with information about the particular module (Student 5).

I expect them to answer some of our questions and correct us. You find that they do not help us. Our tutor says that all the answers are correct but I do not expect that from them. I also expect them to understand the module that they are facilitating but you can see that they do not understand the module (Student 4)
Other students felt self empowered and viewed their role as making a contribution to the learning process during contact sessions

*My role at the tutorial session is to participate in order to help the tutor to try to understand us. If I participate I contribute a lot to tutorial session* (Student 6)

Among the tutors there was two different perception of the role the tutors are supposed to play. One tutor conceptualizes the role of the tutor as teaching and answering students’ questions. The tutor explained:

*When training they should touch on the questions. You find that when you are busy teaching there are those who want to ask you about the exam questions. We do not know about the exams we are just tutors. We must be sure about ourselves. We must not be embarrassed standing in front of them* (Tutor 2).

Two tutors described the tutor role as facilitating learning and not teaching the students. They expected the students to be involved in group work and learn through peer support:

*Much is not expected of me with regard to being an expert. I am just required to facilitate the learning process. It is very interesting because the students themselves are engaged, they work themselves. I give them a platform to learn* (Tutor 6).

*What I do not want them to do is to keep quite and be passive listeners as if manna will come from heaven and drop bread and they will start eating. I want them to get down into the books and get it. They should debate and come up with answers. If they do not understand I contact the co-coordinator and say-look this is the problem* (Tutor 4).

*My main role is to put learners into groups where the groups give inputs as well outputs* (Tutor 3)
Finding 3
Support received during tutorial sessions

The response shows that some students experience tutorial session support as preparing them for doing assignments and writing exams. The students felt that it was also an opportunity for networking with other students and establishing study groups.

*I want to assure you that for each and every assignment I wrote I got high marks because of these sessions. The notes you take at the sessions, when you go home helps you. When it comes to assignments the tutorial sessions is number 1*(Student 2)

The tutors also regarded the support that student get from the tutorial sessions as important:

*I would tell them just to come and hear and see the activities and get the worksheets that they can use to revise at home. If you do not attend the sessions you lose a lot*(Tutor 1).

*They give our learners direction and important aspects which can assist them in an exam*(Tutor 3)

Finding 4
Challenges and recommendations from participants

A common challenge mentioned by all students and the all tutors was administrative problems such as venue change, cancellation of tutorial venues and last minute confirmation of tutorial venues. Other students complained of lack of response when they call the university. The students expressed their disappointment over poor service delivery:

*We are supposed to register by sms but we do not get responses or when they respond they give you a wrong venue. I am looking at a scenario supposing that the students who register are less than ten only to find out that the tenth student is the one re-located to Umtata. This is doing injustice to the nine students*(Student 1).
They responding to us in the eleventh your. We are supposed to come here on Saturday and we get sms on Friday. What about people in the rural areas for instance an alternative venue is in Polokwane and they send the sms at 4:30 and you are a family man (Student 2).

We have administration problem but when we come for tutorial sessions there is nobody to you. We phone the university but we cannot get through the lines are always busy (Student 4).

Contrary to the negative experiences of the students with regard to administrative support, some of the students seemed satisfied with how the university organizes the tutorial sessions.

I am happy with the arrangements. The environment is conducive for the sessions. The tutors are very friendly. So what I could say is that the university should keep on doing what they are doing (Student 3).

These views were corroborated by tutors who interpreted the administrative problems as negligence on the students in adhering to the regulations of the distance education unit:

The students’ sms communication is a problem. You find that while you are busy in one venue the students are in another venue that was previously used for tutorial session. Also the question of making sure that you register first you just do not decide to go. Adhering to the rules and regulations was a challenge (Tutor 5).

My concern is the attendance of students. We were supposed to be 20 but only 6 attended the tutorial sessions. Some think that the venue is at Polokwane while the venue is here at Mokopane. They are not aware of the venue at Mokopane. Others went where we were the other time because of their ignorance they did not check their sms (Tutor 2).

Other challenges that were not administrative were the use of vernacular language during the tutorial sessions, lack of adequate preparation before doing assignment 1, and questionable tutor competency. The students explained:

Some of our colleagues who is primary school teachers sometimes find it hard to express themselves in English. Somebody teaching grade R will
use vernacular throughout but we have to reproduce the material in English and that is when it becomes a problem (Student 1).

If possible the tutorial sessions should come before the first assignment. To help us in writing the assignment. Even in our group we did not perform well in the assignment one. With assignment two I can assure you that through the tutorial sessions we are 100% (Student 2).

At times you find that the tutor knows only one module and the second one is too difficult for him when you ask him a question he cannot answer (Student 4).

As the students talked about the challenges they also made suggestions of what needs to be improved. They recommended that the university should consider appropriate venues and communicate to students in good time.

*Why can they not send the sms a week after the deadline so that we can prepare ourselves because they are aware of who has registered (Student 2).*

Another student expressed the need for more tutorial sessions:

*They should be increased from 4-6 so that the concern students should be regularly in touch with their books to remind them that they are students of the university of Pretoria having enrolled for a particular program (Student 1).*

**Discussion**

The distance education students that were interviewed in the study found tutorial sessions beneficial in the sense that they could better understand the subject content through peer learning and support. There was a strong link between attending tutorial sessions and good performance in assignments and examinations. The extent to which the students expressed their appreciation to the tutors after passing exams seems to motivate and reassured the tutors on the impact of their guidance and assistance. Stevenson and others (2006) reported similar findings. In their study the positive feedback from the students on tutor leadership motivated the tutors to continue looking into the key issues of the course material. The support received during tutorial session for most of the learners seemed more beneficial than studying alone. Dzakiria (2008) also noted
that students studying alone may feel isolated and experience learning problems. Similarly, Cain and others (2003) found that some of the students in their study regarded their peers as important learning support. The students were able to connect and share advice and common experiences. In this study it is not only the peers who were able to learn from one another but the tutors were also able to learn from students making the learning process mutually advantageous.

Another important aspect of this study was the different conception of the role of the tutor by the students and conflicting understanding of the tutor role among the tutors. Some students wanted discussion and interaction with others while other students wanted lectures and focus on course content (Stevenson et al, 2006). Third year student needed tutor support with reflective learning and content oriented skills rather than pastoral care while the first years relied on self study (Brigley & Kell, 2007). The way the tutors interpreted their role and how they facilitated learning in class seems to have an impact on the experiences of the students. Different students have different learning styles and needs. Some students engage more deeply with the study material and need passive tutor support while others are disengaged with the learning material and more active tutor guidance and support is needed (Carnwell, 2000). The different understanding of what the tutor should do suggest a need to reassess and re-examine the role of the tutor. This paper argues that the role of the tutor should be balanced between providing insight in the course content and facilitating peer learning through group discussions. Although it is stated in the Administration Booklet (2010) that the tutor need not be an expert it appears that there is need for the tutor to be competent and conversant with the content knowledge of the subject discussed in a tutorial session for the benefit of the students. However, tutors who are more inclined to teaching may not have adequate time for group work and student may depend on the tutor as owner of knowledge. While other students believed in ownership of knowledge through constructivist learning in group discussions.
The main challenge evident in the data was students’ dissatisfaction with inadequate administrative support service of the university. The students' experiences of administrative problems suggest disengagement from communication with the university and at times unaware of the changes in the logistical arrangements for the tutorial sessions. The students also expected to have tutorial venue at a convenient place and to be informed of the tutorial venues in time for them to make the necessary family arrangements to enable them attend the sessions. Dzakiria (2007) asserts that the role of management is crucial for successful learning support in distance learning. Effective communication is a vital element in learning support for distance students (Cain et al, 2003).

**Implications for practice**

1. The appreciation of peer support was an important finding that should be explored further. The university should encourage peer support networks beyond the tutorial and contact session settings. Cain and others (2003) also recommended that the course instructor can develop a community forum for informal peer support networks.

2. Redefining the role of the tutor is crucial so that the tutors and the students have a common understanding of what the tutor is suppose to do. The students have high expectations from the tutor as academic support not just a facilitator. Tutor training should focus on strategies that develops competency on course content knowledge.

3. It seems that it is not enough to rely on sms communication the university should reconsidering additional communication strategies to subsidize the use of sms Further research is required to establish a more effective communication system to meet the expectation of the students and
enhancing the process learning support. The communication message send to students should be timely and if possible send reminders.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the students in the study experience tutorial sessions as a useful learning support structure. What needs to be addressed is reconsidering the role of the tutor and retraining the tutors so that there is a common understanding of what is expected of them to do in a tutorial session. The concerns of the students with regard to administrative challenges should be addressed in the process of continuous improvement of the distance education tutorial sessions.

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