

Distance Learning Students: Should we use Technology or Pedagogy to Overcome Work and Life Obstacles?

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This paper introduces the stories of three learners on the distance learning option of a Masters degree in Public Health, which is offered by a University in the United Kingdom. These learners were challenged by obstacles related to their employment, and following an earlier paper in which we discussed some of the specific issues surrounding learners who work entirely online (Sapsed and Mathew, 2011), this paper outlines some of the technological and pedagogic strategies that were employed to address these challenges. In a highly reflective manner we present findings that might suggest little more than common sense – that with distance learning programmes, both technology and pedagogy are vital components but are interdependent on one another – but we hope to show ways in which an academic tutor online assumes roles that are often beyond the customary scope of teaching: he or she is frequently obliged to assume pastoral care roles that might be better suited to a counsellor or a professional in a different industry.

Student 1

This student started his Public Health Masters degree at a University near his home; however, he was later diagnosed with cancer. Following his remission after chemotherapy, he knew he had to return to his University because it would only permit a one-year interruption to his studies, regardless of personal circumstances. Having failed his first assignment upon his return, the student had his registration discontinued by the University.

Without the qualification, the student felt that he was less employable, although he did not believe that this was in any way related to his own personal skills set. Keen to obtain the qualification, the student approached our University as he understood that we had an APEL system (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) and a wide entry-route to the programme. We discussed how he should complete the programme once he had transferred his units as APEL: it seemed that the correct pathway was to complete the Independent Study Unit, because this would allow him to update his credentials as a he completed the required portfolio of work. Apart from engaging in a slow way, this method would ensure that he had satisfied the learning outcomes for the programme.

There were concerns over whether this student would be fit enough to complete his studies. Another incompleteness could have devastating consequences for him, so we asked for a letter of support from his doctor and his manager. These came very quickly, and the doctor's comments were very pertinent: stating that the course would be the 'making of him' if he could complete it. This comment was also echoed by his manager. We wrote back to the manager

and asked if he was prepared to be his mentor at work; a request to which he readily agreed.

Once the support mechanisms were in place, we went back to the student and began the process: firstly the APEL was completed and the Independent Study unit was set up. It was decided to complete the required top-up to his studies slowly over a two-year period. The student sent us his previous work so that we could compare it to ours and identify and work on any gaps that existed. For example, he had not developed the ability to enhance his work by adding critical thinking to underpin the point that he was making.

Skype conversations were arranged to discuss his academic writing. During these it was easy to see that he had little idea about the standards expected. We offered to read and develop his plan for the unit of study. This was very useful; soon I became aware that he was not considering the wider picture surrounding the topic area. Since here again he was not sure what was meant by this, we arranged Skype sessions to talk through what he was expected to do.

Once more this boosted the student's confidence. He could now see why he had failed in his previous assignment. He asked why these things had not been picked up on by his previous university, but this question could not be answered. At this point we had a note from his manager to say that he seemed to have regained his self-esteem and was becoming 'a different person'.

The student completed two units (with support) within the first six months of his studies. It was suggested that he take time off from this over the summer, before starting his dissertation. We received a note from his wife saying that they had been away on holiday and that it was the best holiday since his illness.

The next few months were taken up by sorting out the student's dissertation. It was during this period that the student had difficulties relaxing. Delays made him anxious. So, during one Skype conversation, he was asked what he did to relax at home, and he said that he used to play squash before his illness but did not really do anything now. We talked through things that he might consider, and left it at that. The availability of regular contact seemed to dissipate anxiety during his dissertation; and setting a step-by-step pace enabled his dissertation to be completed. In due course he gained a good grade which would give him a commendation overall.

It was strange to meet him at graduation; we had never met face-to-face. His proud wife and his manager were with him as

he graduated. Speaking to his manager after the ceremony, we asked how much support he needed and he answered: very little, apart from a little bit of reassurance when it was near to the hand-in date. About six months later, the student and his manager wrote to say how his confidence and self-esteem had grown. His manager said that he had forgotten what he had been like before his cancer and he thought it was the gaining of his Masters that had brought him back. Later, he was promoted at work, and claimed that his life had been turned around during his studies. His last comment was: *'The University provided me with a choice. I was lucky that I got an opportunity to rebuild my career.'*

Commentary

This student's life was changed by a mixture of technology and pedagogy, with an extra ingredient present and every bit as vital: the ingredient of basic decency and humanity. In some institutions, this student would have struggled for a long time; quite possibly he would not have completed his studies and would have grown despondent. All it took to get him re-motivated was the technology of Skype and the agent of an interested personal tutor, who was able to guide him and support him.

Student 2

Student 2 was a full time student from Norway, who was in their armed forces as a submarine commander, but who had been given a year off to complete her Public Health Masters. It was over twenty years since she had undertaken any academic studies, but she had completed many in-house army courses, and now we were running a distance learning course that she wanted to study.

All started well, then a situation arose in Afghanistan and the student was recalled to train soldiers in Cyprus. This caused a lapse in her studies, which we managed successfully, but just as normality was returning, her husband was sent to Afghanistan for six months (he was a pilot in the American army). Since she knew the situation out there, this became a very stressful time for the student, and keeping her active with her studies required supporting her personally as well as supporting her studies. To achieve this we set up regular Skype sessions to complement our frequent email exchanges. Some of these sessions turned out to be personal support, so there were highs and lows during this period; but she did keep going with her studies. Frequently she mentioned that she was not performing at her best, so we

talked through lower grades. Her work was submitted but it was not as good as before, and she became depressed.

The student and her husband were reunited at the beginning of her dissertation, which we had planned while her husband was away. This was important as she wished to undertake a Delphi study. Linstone and Turoff (1975) characterise a Delphi study as a means of structuring a group communication process so that the group deals with a complex problem and is assessed on its judgement, while individual contributions are also evaluated and opportunities are provided for individuals to revise their views. In the example of Student 2, the Delphi study should not have been a problem because she worked with experts in many areas. Her dissertation looked at who should be responsible for planning during major *disasters* (for example, earthquakes or floods), as there seemed to be many bosses and no organisation in recent *disasters*, and money was wasted. Although she was capable of completing the work required, and although her husband was out of Afghanistan, her recent low grades had unsettled her. For this reason we set up regular sessions with email and Skype; half of these were still used for personal support.

Halfway through writing her dissertation, she discovered she was pregnant, after many years of thinking it would not happen. The Skype session took on an added dimension: the student knew that I was a midwife by background. The session soon became flexible, depending on what her needs were on that day. With continual support she completed her Masters but remained disappointed with her middle grades. However, she firmly believed that by concentrating on her course she did not think of getting pregnant, so it happened. Despite her initial months being difficult with tiredness and morning sickness, she battled through and gained a good grade for her dissertation, which put her lower grades into perspective. She missed her graduation as the pregnancy was not trouble free, and finally she was delivered of a baby boy.

One of her obligations on completion of her year was to right up a reflection on the course and what she had gained by completing it. She wrote: *"Studying through distance learning gave me a lot of flexibility around work/life/study schedules, and the standards set by the course were never compromised by this."* She wrote after she had been to America, because she had not told her in-laws that they had become grandparents. Her mother-in-law emailed us: *"Can you find her another course!"* The army was so impressed with the way that this student managed

her studies that she returned to work with the army in a training role which allows her flexibility.

Commentary

As with Student 1, Student 2 responded as the result of a rekindling of the 'can-do' spirit, and much of the credit for this must be given to her academic tutor, who was herself encouraged (or obliged) to take on the additional role of one responsible for providing pastoral care. We might say that this particular distance learner responded to a combination of pedagogy, technology and psychology.

Student 3

This student headed up the administration for charities in Belgium that were working on HIV/AIDs projects in Africa. We asked why she needed to undertake the course and she said it was to give her academic credibility among her colleagues who had PhDs. She had not studied at this level and did not have a first degree, but she had much experience. She wished to complete the course over five years. *She could take breaks from the course* when her work became too demanding. We agreed that she should take one unit first, then she would know if she could commit herself to her studies. One major asset that she had was excellent computer skills, and the unit was completed to her satisfaction.

The second term was completed with little difficulty, apart from the student not understanding referencing and critical appraisal, which we explored using Skype, email correspondence and by referring the student to examples on the Web. She needed to have the summer off to complete a project in Nigeria. Returning to her studies in October, within a month her mother was diagnosed as having breast cancer. The student had to fly back and forwards to Sweden, where her mother lived, her father having died some years previously. From the information she gave us about her mother, it was obvious to a professional that it was a terminal situation. However, the student felt that all the treatments meant that her mother would recover.

Was it right to prepare the student for the possibility that her mother might not recover? This was certainly outside a lecturer's remit, but was it also outside a personal tutor's remit?

When the student returned from a trip to see her mother, she said how bad her mother looked. In exploring this with her she suddenly realised that her mother had little time left, and she

was an only child. The units of study were abandoned, but she did not want to lose contact as she felt she needed some normality in her life. Her mother died very quickly and the reality of being on her own hit her hard. She needed somebody to care for her, and this was not a lecturer's place.

The student had been communicating with another student (Student 4) who was equally mature and who was finding studying much easier. This second student felt able to Skype the first student regularly; she explained that she had an excellent supportive family – if things got hard she could talk to them and they would come up with a solution. All went well at first with this arrangement, but then disaster struck. Student 3 was taken to Ethiopia on a work project. In the two weeks she spent there, two of her colleagues were hacked to death in an attack and Student 3 was the person who found them. This began a period of withdrawal for the student; we all tried to keep in contact with her and although her work came in, she appeared to have lost her way – and understandably so. She was heading for a breakdown.

What prevented this breakdown was that Student 3 had to come to the UK for a work meeting, and she arranged to come and meet us. Another student decided that she would look after Student 3 during her visit. This arrangement worked very well and they hit it off straight away, and arranged subsequent contacts. After three months, she felt she could continue, provided that we would continue to support her. So between the three of us she felt properly supported and helped. Her next two units were a struggle to complete, but this left her with only her dissertation to complete.

In due course the student wrote: *"I developed good prioritization and organizational skills thanks to this course, which had a very positive impact on my career. I highly recommend it! The*

combination of these facilities provided me with an excellent opportunity to learn, and the University should be proud of this unique offer, which is probably not made by other universities in UK."

Commentary

More than with Students 1 or 2, Student 3 depended eventually on the strengths inherent in a system of (unofficial) peer assisted learning. While technology was instrumental in helping this learner through her course, it was even more important in building an emotional scaffold to support her through a devastating occurrence.

All three of these brief case studies show (we feel) that when it comes to distance learning, there is no pedagogy without technology, and vice versa; but that these two components on their own are likely to be joined by a wealth of other tools, such as pastoral care and peer support. We have suggested that each student's experience is by nature distinct and unique. Each lecturer's experience, in dealing with a student body's idiosyncrasies, will also be one of a kind.

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