Preparing Tutors for Online Collaborative Learning at the Open University Malaysia

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Abstract: To be more effective, open and distance learning programmes should incorporate collaborative learning environments with the purpose of engaging learners in the learning process. This will eventually develop into a learning community that would help, among others, to reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation commonly felt among distance learners. A study to determine the perceptions of tutors on online collaborative learning, particularly in how tutors viewed online collaborative learning at the Open University Malaysia (OUM) was conducted. Their online pattern of collaboration was also determined. The paper highlights the research and its findings and provides suggestions on future training of the tutors to help ensure the success of online collaborative learning at the university. The findings will be useful to those who are designing tutor training programmes for online collaborative learning.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Tutor Training, Open Distance Learning

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the success in preparing tutors to provide an effective online collaborative environment at the Open University Malaysia (OUM). In particular, the study sought to determine the perceptions on online collaborative learning among OUM tutors, the pattern of online collaboration and to determine whether online collaboration led to improved understanding of the subject matter as perceived by the tutors. The study was conducted for the first time among tutors who have received previous training. The final objective was to ensure that the online component of the instructional process is effective in meeting the course objectives.

OUM is an open distance learning institution in Malaysia whose first intake of students was in August 2001. At the time the study was conducted, there were about 450 tutors serving some 6,400 students. OUM was offering its sixth semester then. Online collaborative learning is one of the three identified modes of learning. Generally, this is a very new mode of learning for all OUM tutors. The study was conducted for the first time to gauge their perceptions to online collaborative learning, to determine the pattern of online collaboration and to see how far it is contributing to learner's content knowledge.

The other two modes are face-to-face tutorials and self-directed learning. The face-to-face tutorials are held in about 20 learning centres located throughout the nation in the larger cities as well as the smaller towns. A few of these learning centres cater to students living in remoter parts of the country, particularly in East Malaysia. For these students to reach the nearest learning center, it may require them to travel overnight by express boat, bus or fly in a small 18-seater aircraft with limited frequency. The journey itself is a challenge for such students.

Face-to-face tutorials are held five times over a twenty-week semester, or thrice over a ten-week semester. Tutors are expected to help students revise topics in their modules, provide exercises to help reinforce learning and conduct quizzes during two of the five tutorial sessions. Self-directed learning mainly comprises readings from the university's digital library collection and to read and do exercises provided in the modules provided by the university.

This paper highlights the first study by OUM on the tutors' perception on online collaborative learning. The findings are discussed and the paper concludes with recommendations for a more effective training and hence, to ensure the effectiveness of online collaborative learning.

The Role of Online Collaborative Learning in Distance Education

At the OUM, online collaborative learning is viewed as a process whereby two or more parties support each other in attaining the other party's learning goal. More specifically, the process of online collaborative learning starts with the tutor posing a relevant and discussive question for learners to think and reflect. Following this, learners are expected to contribute to the building of knowledge by posting their opinions, experiences and concluding on the question posed. While some learners will be more active in contributing to the online discussions, others may feel more comfortable reading their peers' contributions and elaborating upon them but there will also be learners who have little confidence in making an online presence. In such instances, the tutor is expected to motivate and bring these learners into the scene.

Research has indicated the benefits of online collaborative learning. According to Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000), students in distance education programs, though separated spatially, can gain a sense of togetherness as they share and clarify ideas, actively contribute to a team, and cooperatively solve problems. With respect to this, the mental make-up of the online tutor is crucial, as a positive mental make-up will ensure success of online learning.

In a study of nurses embarking on a distance learning programme, students felt that online discussions were appropriate in that it will develop critical students (Abas, 2003). They also indicated that participation in online discussions will allow students to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses and they liked the fact that they will be in communication with course mates and lecturers in spite of being at a distance from each other.

In open and distance learning environments, online collaboration is seen as crucial to help learners reach their target goals quickly as well as leverage on their prior knowledge and hands on experiences. It is a way of making learners belong to a community of practitioners, whereby their total acquired knowledge helps in further development of the individual. Further, online collaborative learning helps in identifying learner presence and support belongingness. However, few studies have been conducted that examine the impact of the collaborative teaching/learning model in the distance-education setting (Hardwick, 2000). In a study by Pilkington (1988), it was reported that despite a low-key presence of online tutors, there was a marked effect on discourse.

Some other research approaches had examined how participants in a collaborative environment support each other and conditions under which such situations are achieved (Dilenbourg, Baker, Blaye and O'Malley, 1996; Baker, deVries and Lund, 1999). The online tutor has six very important roles to play, that is, to model effective learning, track learner discussions, provide expert knowledge, motivate learners, provide the technology support and support the learner in language related issues (Abtar, 2001). Where patterns of interactions are concerned, tutors should provide guidance for students on how to capitalize on each other's strengths.

Thus it is imperative that the social aspects of successful collaborative teams be explicitly taught and this may include taking an interest in team members knowledge beyond the institutional curriculum specifications, appreciating that peers can provide their tacit knowledge only through active questioning methodologies and a willingness to share individual ideas. Robbins and Finley (1995) have the following as qualities that should be present in online tutors in promoting effective peer collaboration: an ability to specify personal goals, willingness to confront conflict positively, an ability to understand the other person's perspective, and a readiness to celebrate accomplishments. The tutor should be seen as a facilitator and not a moderator as aptly forwarded by Cox, Clark, Heath and Plumpton (2000) whereby they distinguish the facilitator and moderator role as such: The main perception of moderator is control and power whereas the key perception o f facilitator is fellow learner with a unique role to co-ordinate the interaction (p.27).

According to Durling, Cross & Johnson, 1996; Mason 1998; Goodfellow, 1999, Salmon 1999, and Cox et al., 2000) the online tutor should progressively encourage students to take charge of online learning. They can be asked to play the role of the facilitator like leading a discussion topic, or summarizing key points after some amount of discussion has been carried out.

Hence, for reasons above, OUM had identified online collaborative learning to be an essential part of the learning process. It has also allocated at least five percent of the course assessment to be awarded to active and successful participation of students in the online discussions. OUM plans to increase the five percent but not until it is convinced that both students and tutors are ready.

It is imperative that OUM prepares its tutors and students to embrace online collaborative learning. Some of the issues that need to be addressed include the tutor's perception and roles. Tutors should have a positive attitude towards this new mode of learning and are able to understand what their roles are in the online environment. It is also important to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of online collaborative learning by analyzing the pattern of postings to a discussion topic.

The Study

The study was conducted among a select group of tutors who attended a colloquium for Open and Distance Tutors at the main campus. There were 96 tutors who attended. They were selected from the 450 tutor population based on their past performance. Most of the selected tutors were found to have been active online with their tutees.

The colloquium was held to reinforce earlier tutor training sessions given several months before when the significance of online tutoring had been highlighted and how it was to be conducted. The sessions had explained the processes involved in online collaborative learning and the role of the tutors. It was thus felt that a study of the tutors' perception on online collaborative learning at this point was necessary. The study aimed to identify how many of these tutors felt they understood the process and to what degree did they perceive students to have benefited in terms of their content knowledge. The study also sought to determine the pattern of online collaboration. The

purpose of the study was to help OUM plan its future training programmes for tutors to ensure the effectiveness of online collaborations.

The questionnaires were distributed to all the 96 tutors at the end of the colloquium. The colloquium had aimed at raising tutors' understanding of effective face-to-face tutorials, academic counseling and online tutoring. The questionnaires consisted of three sections namely Sections A, B and C. Section A requested for the background information of the tutor. Section B comprised a series of statements seeking answers to the three main research questions (see below). Section C contained open-ended questions whereby tutors were asked to rank and give reasons related to benefits of online collaborative learning, their satisfaction of the online collaborative learning and their comments and suggestions for improvement.

1. How did tutors view online collaborative learning?

2. What was the pattern of online collaboration?

3. Did online collaborative learning contribute to improved understanding of content knowledge?

The first research question sought to determine how far tutors understood the process of collaborative learning and how much they agree in terms of its effectiveness as an important component of learning at OUM. An item to address how much they knew of what was expected of then in the online collaborative environment was also included. Tutors were also asked how much they enjoyed posting messages, how frequently they read messages posted by their tutees and whether there were a variety of postings.

The second research question was aimed at determining the general pattern of online collaboration, judged by how active students were in sending messages to the group, how active they were in responding to postings from their peers and to who were most of the postings directed.

The third research question was included to ascertain tutors' views on how collaborative learning had contributed to their tutees' understanding of content knowledge. The findings are reported in Tables 1 through 3.

In Section C of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with the respective statements that addressed the three research questions. It was felt that a four-point Likert scale in the form of a forced-choice response scale with an even number of responses was more suitable for the study. The statements were relevant and based on the respondents practical experiences rather than opinions.

The questionnaires were distributed to 96 tutors but only 68 completed and returned the questionnaires. The response rate was 71%. The total population of OUM tutors was 450 tutors. Hence, the respondents made up of 15% of the total population of tutors appointed by OUM to provide online tutoring. While the respondents cannot be taken to be representative of the population of tutors, it is believed that their feedback was valuable and may be valid after all, given the fact that online tutoring is a new approach to learning among the appointed tutors.

Findings

How Did Tutors View Online Collaborative Learning?

Table 1 reports the findings based on tutors views on online collaborative learning. When the tutors were asked whether they understood the process of collaborative learning, the majority, that is 95.6 % of tutors either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Only 4.4% of the tutors indicated that they did not understand the process. On whether tutors felt that online collaborative learning is an important component of learning at OUM, the majority, that is, 96.6 percent of the group responded positively. Only 2 (2.9%) tutors disagreed. When next asked whether they knew what is expected of them in the online collaborative environment, 24 (35.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 42 (61.8%) responded that they knew what is expected of them in the online collaborative environment. Only two (2.9%) respondents indicated they did not know what was expected of them. On the frequency of reading the postings, 77.3% of the tutors reported that they viewed the postings three or more times per week. And, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that there was a variety of postings. Out of a total of 67 tutors who responded to the

statement, "I enjoy posting messages in the discussion board," a total of 58 tutors (86.6 percent) responded positively and 9 (13.4 %) responded negatively to the statement.

Items	Strongly Disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly Agree N (%)
1. I understand the process of collaborative learning (N=68)	0 (0)	3 (4.4)	41 (60.3)	24 (35.3)
2. Online collaborative learning is an important component of learning at OUM (N=68)	0 (0)	2 (2.9)	37 (54)	29 (42.6)
3. I know what is expected of me in the online collaborative learning environment (N=68)	0 (0)	2 (2.9)	42 (61.8)	24 (35.3)
4. I enjoy posting messages in the discussion board (N=67)	1 (1.5)	8 (11.9)	39 (58.2)	19 (28.4)
5. I read the postings three or more times per week (N=63)	1 (1.6)	11 (17.5)	32 (48.5)	19 (28.8)
6. There is a variety of postings (N=65)	3 (4.6)	10 (15.4)	36 (55.4)	16 (24.6)

Table 1: Tutors' Views on Online Collaborative Learning

It was generally found that learners depended on the tutor online (see Table 2). This can be deduced from the pattern, with regard to frequency of postings to the group and to the tutor as well as postings in response to their peers. The majority, that is, 69.2% of the tutors found that learners were not posting messages to the group. And, 61.2% of the tutors indicated that the learners were also not active in replying to postings from their peers. Instead, most postings from the learners were directed to the tutor. This was reported by 67.8% of the tutors who returned the questionnaire.

Items	Strongly Disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly Agree N (%)
1. I noticed that most students are active in sending postings to the group (N=65)	10 (15.4)	35 (53.8)	17 (26.2)	3 (4.62)
2. I noticed that all students are active in replying to postings from their peers (N=67)	11 (16.4)	30 (44.8)	22 (32.8)	4 (6)
3. Most postings are directed to the tutor (N=62)	1 (1.6)	19 (30.6)	35 (56.5)	7 (11.3)

Table 2: Tutors' Views on Patterns of Online Collaboration

Items	Strongly Disagree N (%)	Disagree N (%)	Agree N (%)	Strongly Agree N (%)
1. Content knowledge improved through online collaborative learning (N=63)	2 (3.2)	10 (16.0)	44 (69.8)	7 (11.0)
2. I think and reflect on the questions posed in the discussion board before offering a reply (N=67)	0 (0)	6 (9.0)	41 (61.2)	20 (29.9)
3. Online discussions are well moderated and are focused towards a particular issue (N=66)	3 (4.6)	15 (22.7)	42 (63.6)	6 (9.1)
4. The online discussions are interactive (N=64)	2 (3.1)	19 (29.7)	33 (51.6)	10 (15.6)
5. Students contribute to each other's understanding tremendously (N=67)	4 (6.0%	28 (41.8)	30 (44.8)	5 (7.5)

Table 3: Tutors' Views on whether Online Collaborative Learning Contributed to Increased Content Knowledge

content knowledge and 91.1% tutors said learners had thought and reflected on the questions posed in the discussion board before replying to the postings. The majority of the tutors, that is, 72.7% also perceived that they have

moderated the online discussions well by focusing on a particular issue. On the whole, 67.2% of the tutors believed that the online discussions were interactive. However, only 52.3% of the tutors found that learners contributed to each other's understanding. In other words, they felt that learners were interacting more with their tutor rather than with each other.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On the whole, it can be concluded that the OUM tutors were positive towards the value of online collaborative learning. They believed that online collaborative learning was important and this is supported by the fact that about 77% of the tutors viewed the online postings more than three times a week. The tutors agreed that online collaborative learning contributed to the quality of learning or the majority (86.6%) of the tutors who completed the questionnaire would not have expressed their joy in posting messages to the board. These findings could be largely due to the fact that the OUM has a very rigorous and committed culture of training the tutors before they go on board the online tutoring process.

In training the tutors, they are introduced to an array of e-learning concepts and aspects of online tutoring which includes the process and benefits of online facilitation as well as the roles of online tutors. Apart from that they have a hands-on session on the OUM learning management system, particularly on how to use it. In addition, every tutor is provided with a guide on effective online tutoring, specially prepared by the university and distributed as hard copies. It is thereby recommended that the present system of training tutors be maintained but at the same time more features added to reinforce the techniques of how to be more effective in online collaborative learning.

In view of the fact that online collaborative learning is relatively new, with few of the OUM tutors having experienced it, one suggestion is to establish an ongoing online discussion group (web-based threaded discussions) on how to develop an effective online collaborative learning environment as part of the training. The university would be recommended to make the latter compulsory for tutors prior to their appointment as tutors. It should be noted that OUM receives 100 times more applications than that available for the tutor position

For the online portion of tutor training, topics could include aspects of online tutoring, roles of online facilitators and skills on effective tutoring with the aim of building a learning community. It is envisaged that a few model online tutors be appointed to moderate the discussions among the OUM tutors to be. The model facilitators could provide pointers, motivate active participation by encouraging passive participants to post their viewpoints, point to useful resources and in the process, help develop effective online tutoring skills. The weaving and summarizing of the discussions should also be included to demonstrate how this is achieved. These are precisely the skills online tutors themselves need to be doing with the learners. This inevitably, could become the support group for tutors who are in the process of developing or refining their skills.

It appears that the OUM learners are still largely dependent on the tutor in the online collaborative learning environment. The instructor is very much the "sage on the stage" to most, if not all Malaysian learners. With effective moderation of the discussions among learners by their tutors, this "sage on the stage" belief can be eventually replaced with respect for their peers as their "learning consultants." It is believed that this is a process of enculturation requiring a period of time and patience. With effective training, it is also expected that the new learning culture should begin to emerge and evolve within the near future. This can be determined by the OUM and perhaps reflected in policies that will encourage effective online learning.

In addition, it appears that the OUM learners are still very dependent on the tutor for online support. As life-long learning skills are important for employee survival in any organization, it might be timely that learners are made aware that depending too much on one expert may not augur too well in terms of total personal development. Also, this could have happen because tutors may not be willing to let go of their authority. As aptly stated by Cox et al, the tutor should be enlightened on the fact that he is a co-learner in this process and not someone in control and power. As such during the training session emphasis should be given to these areas and case studies should be discussed in detail. Strategies of weaning learners off the tutor will definitely need to be incorporated in future training programs as well.

Generally, it can be concluded that online discourse led to an improvement in the understanding of content knowledge. A contributing factor could be that discussions were more directed towards particular issues and well reflected upon before the answers were posted. A related factor could have been the interactive process that ensued between learners and between learners and tutors. Whilst these findings give a general view of tutors' perceptions on content acquisition, it is recommended that a more in-depth study be carried out. This should include an analysis of the postings made by tutors and learners. To determine also if the quality of online interactions have actually contributed to improvement in learner content knowledge, it is recommended that the study be extended to learners. Also, it would be useful to learn if online discourse promoted the development of social skills. While the acquisition of content could also have been partly due to the fact that online learners at the OUM are also assessed on their online interactions (5-10% of the total final marks), it will be interesting to find out in a future study, how the students are graded, is it the frequency or quality of postings?

Perhaps, another suggestion is to attempt to create a grading matrix for online participation of learners reflecting not only the frequency and quality of postings but the timeliness as well. And, to further see whether online participation could be given marks that will make up at least 20 percent of their total course marks. Another suggestion is to see if learners could be rewarded for their effective participation in the discussions, thus contributing to the understanding and achievement of the learning objectives by the group. They could be peer-evaluated and awarded "learner of the month." Similarly, tutors could be rewarded for their effectiveness as online tutors by analyzing the threaded discussions and serve as a model to other "newer" tutors.

Effectiveness in creative a successful collaborative learning environment is more of an art than a science. Its success depends not only on the tutor but on the learners as well. The concept, rationale and the ways of achieving this has to be clear right from the start and perhaps best ensured by continuing with what OUM has been doing to train its online tutors and to consider implementing some or all of the suggestions above. The study has found the tutors to be receptive towards online collaborative learning. Nevertheless, this needs to be confirmed by the learners and more studies need to be carried out in the near future to ensure that online collaborative learning has, indeed, helped learners achieve the learning objectives.

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