Chapter 14

Extending access to learning support: the development of an online learning support site

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Introduction

Traditionally certain groups, including tertiary distance education and part-time students, have had limited, if any, access to the academic learning support systems provided on campus. With the development of technology and online education approaches to teaching and learning, there are opportunities to increase access to learning support provisions for all students, including the above groups, whether they are studying in online or traditional contexts. This chapter outlines the issues behind the development of an online learning support site at UNITEC Institute of Technology in Auckland.

The need for learning support online

Higher education is in a time of rapid political, socio-economic and technological change. Some of the distinguishing features of higher education in the current era include:

- an increasing demand for access to higher education opportunities
- a demand for more client responsive and open and flexible delivery courses
- a growing number of learners with diverse needs, abilities and learning backgrounds
- a rapid transition from traditional approaches to education to forms of online delivery
- an emerging expectation that online media will enhance learning to accommodate the needs and preferences of learners in higher education.

One of the outcomes of these features is the development of online approaches to teaching and learning. The learning challenges and opportunities presented by this development have significant implications for the design and delivery of learning support provisions. It is essential that learning support services respond to the challenges and opportunities by adapting existing and developing new forms of support to meet the needs of online learners.

This response includes the need for careful consideration about the relationship between pedagogy and online learning. Staff involved in making changes need to be able to put their policy and practice in context and be able to support it with a theoretical position. It is essential that they have an understanding of the pedagogy appropriate to it. For learning support staff to make the transition successfully to becoming online teachers they must do more than develop new technical skills. They must also develop and use appropriate pedagogical methods.
Most Western higher education institutions have equal opportunity statements committing them to providing and improving access to their programs of study and the services provided by the institution. Online students, who do not come to the campus regularly for their course, do not have equal access to the support services offered to on-campus students. This is potentially an area of conflict between these online students and the institution they are studying with. Provision of quality online learning support services can be seen as one way of upholding principles of social justice through a range of equity and access measures.

During the past two decades significant changes have taken place in demographics of the student population attending tertiary institutions in New Zealand. Additionally, there have been increases in participation rates, significant cost pressures on institutions, changes in funding methods and changes to higher education learning environments. In particular, the demographic and learning environment changes are of particular significance here.

Changes to demographics of the student population

Higher education is experiencing significant changes in the student population. There is an increasingly diverse student population that spans a hitherto relatively unacknowledged range of social and cultural contexts and a wide variety of learning needs, orientations and capacities. The increase in the number and diversity of people participating in tertiary education over the past two decades or more is a feature of what is described as the ‘massification of (higher) education’ (Korsgaard, 1997).

There is a broader range of acceptable entry level qualifications and this has consequences for the skills students bring with them to their study. Some students are unlikely to enter tertiary education with the skills assumed in tertiary literacy. Some of these students, for example, will lack, or be weak in, traditional academic reading and writing skills. Others will have little, or no, experience of computer literacy. These students are no longer in a small minority. Indeed as Thorpe states:

The ‘non-traditional’ student may now be in the majority in many systems of higher education, but we are still working out how their personal and work experience should be accommodated and responded to (Thorpe, 2000, p. 189).

Generally, the majority of students in higher education are full-time students who attend a campus for their learning activities and have access to the learning support facilities provided at their learning institution. However, an increasing number of students are studying online alongside part-time work and family commitments. It is probable that access to traditional on-campus learning support services will be difficult for some of them.

Changes to the learning environment

Higher education is experiencing major changes in the development and delivery of courses of study. As Kenny argues, ‘(c)ontinuing technological development, particularly in the areas of information storage, retrieval and communication, can be expected to alter the manner of teaching at every educational level and in every conceivable setting’ (1998, p. 1). Arguably, one of the most significant changes is the
development of online learning environments. The demand for electronically mediated education will grow exponentially over the next decade. Inglis, Ling and Jootsen emphasise the potential dangers of this exponential growth for some students as follows. ‘The limited access to which equity target groups of students have to personal computing in the home indicates that they may be relatively further disadvantaged’ (1999, p. 24).

There is a need to investigate the impact of online education upon the learning support needs of online students. Existing strategies developed for face-to-face learning support need to be adapted to meet the needs of online students. New strategies need to be developed. Online learning places particular demands on students. It requires independent and motivated learners and, with this emphasis on independent learning, it is essential that students are carefully prepared for that independence. Some of the questions that need to be considered and answered include:

- what alternatives to traditional learning support provisions can we provide to ensure wide access to services for all students?
- how can students be helped to develop the skills necessary for online learning?

It is important to investigate the possibilities for adapting existing resources for online use and for researching new models of learning support to meet the requirements of students studying online.

There are a number of important reasons why learning support staff need to be involved in creating online support sites. These include:
- the need to keep in the forefront of techniques and strategies coming into education and not to be seen as out-of-date and resistant to change
- the provision of support online must be concerned with learning and teaching as well as technology. It is important that learning support staff learn the skills necessary to establish and maintain sites with some necessary help from information technology specialists.

**Some pedagogical concerns**

There is a variety of pedagogical concerns emanating from the change to online education. Arguably, students face all the traditional barriers to learning and also some new ones. For example, they need to learn navigation and online communication skills.

It also appears that online study requires students to be independent learners, able to motivate themselves and to manage their time successfully. Working independently away from the discipline of scheduled lectures and tutorials may require considerable learning support for some students. They also need to be aware that time management skills are very important when they are using the Internet and of the time that can be wasted when ‘surfing’ the Internet. Effectively, learning online places more responsibility on the students. They are also faced with the problem of working in relative isolation compared with their on-campus peers.

Likewise, learning online means that students are learning within a new structure. When on-campus students come into a classroom they can see the teacher and the whiteboard. In other words it is obvious where to look for things. Even if students are
new to the campus they can walk around and see the layout of the campus at a glance. For example they can find where the library is. Students can hold a book in their hand and flick through it to see the main divisions and the number of pages. However in computer learning this sense of obvious structure is gone. The student may not see the progressive layout but may skip from one part of the site to another. They may go past some sections without even realising that they have missed important information. This lack of recognisable structure may create problems for some students.

The personal characteristics that contribute to being a successful online learner are a high level of motivation, feeling comfortable with the level of technology used in the delivery of the course, being able to work independently, being good at time management, having good reading and writing skills and not being prone to procrastination (Phillips, 2000). Students need to be made aware of strategies to assist them to adapt their learning methods to the online environment. It is essential that very early in their first semester of online study that students be introduced to the requirements for successful online learning.

**Learning support at UNITEC**

UNITEC Institute of Technology is located in Auckland, New Zealand. The Institute has 18,000 students, many of whom are part-time. The total is equivalent to 7500 full-time enrolments (UNITEC Annual Report, 1999). Until recently most of the teaching at UNITEC has been based on the traditional mainstream classroom approach. There has never been a significant amount of distance learning provision. However this situation is changing and by 1999 just over 1000 students (many part-time) were studying in courses that were predominantly online. In August 2000 there were 186 courses online, with about 35% being fully operational. The number of students enrolled in these courses is estimated at 2500 (UNITEC Annual Report, 1999).

Some teaching departments have made the decision that all of their courses will have an online element. To begin with some of these courses simply supplement on-campus based teaching, but it is envisaged that other courses will eventually be taught predominantly or wholly online. For example, in 1999, it was decided by the Department of Accountancy Law and Finance that all courses would have an online presence from first semester, 2000 (Malcolm, 2000).

Learning support is delivered by seven specialist staff operating from one centralised unit within UNITEC. The Learning Support Centre (Te Tari Awhina) attempts to meet student needs for learning support by employing a number of strategies. These strategies include the provision of individual and small group advisory sessions, and the teaching of study skills seminars and workshops. The approach has been developed out of counselling models, and has been based to a considerable extent, on concerns for equity and access. In the past this work has often been undertaken independently of mainstream teaching with students coming to the Centre for help with their individual requests for assistance. Increasingly course specific support is now being provided by learning support tutors working with small groups of students. There have also been some successful attempts to work with staff in the classroom to provide a more integrated service to students so that students learn study skills directly in the context of their course curriculum.
Staff at the Centre are aware that the support needs of some students are not being met by the present provisions outlined above. They are aware that the Centre needs to adapt to the changes in education to provide a variety of support opportunities to meet the requirements of students engaged in online learning. There is a consensus that the Learning Support Centre needs to approach the institutional adoption of information-technology-supported learning strategically so that it has a clear vision and objectives for providing learning support in an online environment (Te Tari Awhina: Business Plan, 2000).

**Rationale for the development of an institution specific site**

It is important for the Centre to develop its own online support site. It recognises the need to develop course specific learning support. This will be developed in consultation with UNITEC staff and delivered on a UNITEC Website. The provision of course specific learning support and a virtual drop-in site where students can have immediate or prompt feedback contributed to the need for the development of UNITEC’s Website.

Although there are learning support Websites developed by other higher education providers, these are not always available to outsiders, such as, UNITEC students. Some Websites that were previously available are now password protected so that they are only accessible to students enrolled with the institution. Furthermore, the quality of some accessible online learning support sites is questionable. It would not be helpful for students already experiencing difficulty with study to spend time browsing various sites that are not of high quality. First year students in particular may not have developed sufficient critical skills to be able to discern the usefulness of online resources. There is also the potential for information overload due to the Web providing ready access to vast amounts of information of varying quality. Hence, time-consuming discussions through a number of Websites may not be in the best interests of students.

Consequently, it was recognized that a coordinated learning support website needed to be developed at UNITEC that fitted its needs and context. Strategies which are isolated initiatives undertaken by student support staff alone are less likely to succeed than those which are integrated into the overall work of the institution in providing for students success and retention (Tinto, 1995).

**Blackboard CourseInfo (BBCI): an authoring tool**

Many software developers have created packages that allow lecturers to put material online in a relatively efficiently and easily. Typically authoring tools require less technical knowledge to master than sophisticated programming tools. In particular, they have the advantage that they do not require a thorough knowledge of programming languages.

Throughout 1997 and 1998 a number of online courses were developed at UNITEC, although the experience was that they were often relatively expensive to produce, mainly due to the combined contributions from instructional design, web programming, graphic design and the academic staff. It was realised that a more cost-effective manner of presenting course material online was necessary. It was necessary to find a course authoring tool that would enable staff, who did not have a thorough
knowledge of programming languages used on the Internet, to put their courses online (Malcolm, 2000).

In 1997 the Department of Learning Technologies had been given the tasks of investigating various course authoring tools available and the responsibility for selecting one suitable for UNITEC’s requirements. It was decided that BBCI was the best tool to meet UNITEC’s needs. Some important considerations were: the ease of use for students and staff, and the cost. BBCI provides an interface that makes navigation easy, allowing students to explore different parts of the site and return to where they have come from without getting lost. The software allows lecturers to easily add or remove content, maintain and update resources and control the operations of an online course with a minimum of technical support. They do not need to have detailed knowledge or experience of Internet programming languages. The BBCI authoring shell makes it relatively easy for lecturers to place their material online and add external links, email students and create and monitor discussion boards. BBCI is sold as a site licence, which makes it financially preferable to some authorware systems that operate a charging system related to the number of courses and students.

*The learning support site*

Accordingly, the Learning Support staff used BBCI to develop its Website to provide learning support tailored to UNITEC’s contexts and the students’ needs. Students entering the learning support Website see an announcements page which provides a welcome and a short, clear instruction about how to access resources. It has deliberately been kept brief to make access to other parts of the site as simple as possible.

The Staff Information section provides details about staff such as names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses (hot link) and other information such as specialist teaching areas. Photos of staff members are also displayed.

The course documents section contains the learning support resources. It is subdivided into folders to make navigation easier for students. Generic resources available here at present include:

- Tips for tertiary study
- Academic reading
- Notetaking and notemaking
- Academic writing
- Oral presentations
- Memory, tests and exams
- Mathematics
- Computing.

The communication section provides for students to interact with each other and staff. For example, group discussions may be established on aspects of learning skills. The students may expected to use these sorts of facilities within their formal courses (Malcolm, 2000, p.7). There is also an email facility that currently is not in use on the learning support site, but may be so as the site develop.
The External Links section provides the opportunity for Learning Support (and teaching) staff to post links to Internet sites that they would like students to access. The URL and a brief description of the site is entered and when students click on the link the external site is opened. This provides the opportunity to link students with specialist material on other learning support sites.

The final section is the Student Tools section. This area includes a secure student drop-box where students can submit learning support exercises and tasks, and is otherwise used for their course assignments and to have marked assessment items returned to them.

Current operations

The Learning Support site was operational in February 2001 for the commencement of the academic year. Generic resources are available for student use and program specific resources are also available, for example, algebra for business students and manipulating formulae for business students.

All too often study skills are taught out of the context of the subject area in which the student is studying. Increasingly, however research is showing that this artificial division reduces the effectiveness of learning support. The limited evidence available suggests that integrated study skill programs that offer students an opportunity to learn how to study within the context of their course are the most effective. Chalmers and Fuller point out that integrated programs ‘have been found to be more effective than separate learning strategies programs in affecting outcomes of student learning’ (Chalmers & Fuller, 1996, p.28). This is especially true in higher level thinking skills such as analysis and critical thinking. Tait and Entwistle (1996) criticise study skills advice that is taught separately from course content because of the difficulty experienced by students in transferring the skills into their own context. Tinto’s research (1987, 1995) shows that, regardless of the type of institution or the type of students, integration with staff is a key factor in academic success. Nightingale (1998) also argues for a close relationship between academics and learning support staff.

Some requests have been received from staff for course specific learning support materials that can be developed for particular courses taught online. For example two nursing courses are offered wholly online from 2001. Online course specific learning support resources are currently being developed in conjunction with nursing staff to support students working in these papers.

The Learning Support Centre offers a daily drop-in service between 11:30am and 1pm for students on-campus. Students may call in without an appointment for brief assistance in a ten minute session. Funding has been applied for to allow the development of a virtual online support site or a similar service that offers a prompt reply system for brief enquiries. This would provide an online drop-in support system for off-campus students enrolled in courses that are taught wholly online. Obviously this drop in support service will need to be adapted to the online environment. To begin with, it may be necessary to restrict this facility to targeted courses or groups within the student population and it may not be practical to offer the service using the
real time ‘chat’ facility. It may require something like a 12 or 24 hour turn-around time.

Concluding comment
Learning support is now a recognised, distinctive teaching role in many higher education institutions in New Zealand. That recognition is in part a response to changes in the student population and changes in the learning environment in higher education that have increased the demand for learning support provision. However there have been relatively few studies that have explicitly focused on how to adapt learning support to the changing learning environment in higher education. There have been even fewer studies that have dealt specifically with online learning support for students studying in an online learning environment. There is a need for research to be completed in this area to provide new models of learning support provision.

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