Fostering a transactional presence: a practical guide to supporting work-based learners

Frances Marsden and Andrew Youde

Abstract

The paper provides an assessment of blended learning approaches for part-time students, through the case study of a foundation degree in educational management and administration. It focuses on the utility of concepts of transactional distance and transactional presence implemented through empathetic tutoring of adult, work-based learners. Concepts of transactional distance and transactional presence are outlined and justified. Course structure and delivery, assessment, and support through the effective use of educational technologies are explored and analysed. An evaluation of the impact of the course on participants and their workplaces leads the paper to suggest that blended distance learning in which the quality of dialogue is more important than the number of interactions delivery model ensures that students feel connected to tutors, peers and the university.

Introduction

The foundation degree in Educational Management and Administration is a blended-delivery course, developed for part-time, work-based students working in educational management or administration. An androgogical approach to course development was structured around concepts of transactional distance and transactional distance, and an emphasis on tutor empathy (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 1998, Moore 1997, Shin 2002, Holmberg 1989). This study evaluates the success of the course paying particular attention to philosophical approach, course structure and models of delivery, including the use of educational technology. It hopes to offer a practical guide to supporting students through the effective use of common educational technologies in mediating key tensions, such as tutor workload and conflicting demands on part-time students. The study draws on and extends previous research which explored students' progression from the course and their perceptions of the value of their learning in the workplace (Marsden 2008). Given the current economic climate and increasing rhetoric of alternative and cheaper delivery models, this study offers practical guidance to post-compulsory institutions in designing and developing successful blended programmes for work-based learners.

Course Background

The course opened in 2003 following collaboration between the University, several further education colleges and the local authority. The course is primarily aimed at administrators in universities, colleges and schools who wish to obtain a degree in a subject related to their employment but are not able to study full-time. They tend to be interested in developing their skills in, and knowledge of, educational management and administration in order to improve their understanding both of their current role and its wider educational context. They wish to achieve graduate status for personal and career development. Employers have been keen to encourage their staff to undertake programmes that directly develop and enhance the skills and knowledge of their wider workforce.

The national Workforce Reform Agreement aimed to raise standards in schools by reducing teacher workload through the removal of some bureaucratic tasks, thus freeing teachers to teach and improving the quality of teaching and learning. It coincided with rising prominence of administrative staff in education with, for example, an increased number of school business managers. The reform was intended to maximize the skills of all staff in schools by reallocating administration tasks to support staff, and reducing the workload of both head teachers and their teaching staff. Ten per cent of teacher workload was allocated to planning, preparation and assessment and head teachers turned to school business

managers to relieve them of administration that had previously taken up about a third of their working week, thus leaving them time to lead and develop priorities and plans for school improvement. There are clear cumulative benefits. Ofsted have concluded that planning has become more focused on clear outcomes, with attention to differentiation in the classroom and better resource development. Teachers have also undertaken more collaborative planning and sharing of professional expertise, there are improvements in learning opportunities in schools, and schools are increasingly making better use of their wider workforce.

There have always been graduates working in educational management and administration. Changes in the administration of schools are not the only contribution to a growing demand for high-level skills and knowledge in positions that have not traditionally required graduate entrance. The growth of new technologies, increased competitiveness between schools including a need for marketing strategies, greater accountability, an emphasis on quality assurance, growing litigiousness and the financial independence of institutions - particularly Academies - have also played an important part. The administration of educational institutions is thus increasingly complex, for which foundation degree levels of vocational training are now appropriate.

Over the years the course has recruited from a wide range of educational institutions including teaching hospitals, offender learning institutions and local authorities. This structure has attracted students to the course from a three hundred mile radius of the University. It is offered through a blended delivery that includes both face-to-face teaching and learning through a range of educational technologies. Students attend six dayschools each academic year where modules are introduced, academic skills developed, assessment requirements outlined, and where there are opportunities for interaction with tutors and peers. Delivery and learning are supported through the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) which contains course notes, activities linking theory to practice, wider reading, synchronous and asynchronous discussion boards, and mock assessment tasks.

Theoretical background

Course development was informed by concepts of transactional distance and transactional presence, methods of empathetic teaching, and a focus on the needs of adult learners (Moore 1997, Shin 2002, Holmberg 1989, Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 1998).

Transactional distance in independent study is a wider concept than just the physical separation of students from their tutors. Transactional distance considers the physical separation of tutors and students and the impact it has on learning:

> 'With separation there is a psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between inputs of instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communications space that is the transactional distance' (Moore 1997: 22).

In considering transactions (that is, interactions between tutors and students), Moore argued that some transactions were more 'distant' than others. A course offered through one or more television programmes, for example, offers no opportunity for dialogue and limited scope for meeting individual student needs and is typical of the most 'distant'. Conversely, a personal tutorial, even where it is conducted at a distance, is least 'distant' as it is based on dialogue and the opportunity to address the needs of individual students.

The course design attempted deliberately to ameliorate the potential for such transactional distances between students and tutors by paying attention to three variables: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. Increased dialogue between tutors, students and peers reduces the transactional distance, provided that it is of value to each party – that is, the quality of dialogue is more important than the number of interactions. Most importantly,

informal communication with students encouraged tutor/student dialogue alongside more formally structured interaction.

The structure of the course was based on flexible delivery through the University's VLE in order to lower transactional distance for part-time students experiencing higher education for the first time. The course needs to be flexible in terms of learning outcomes but have sufficient structure in its delivery for students with competing pressures from work and family life. Learner autonomy - 'the extent to which in the teaching/learning relationship it is the learner rather than the teacher who determines the goals, the learning experiences, and the evaluation decisions of the learning programme' - implies that transactional distance is lowered if students are working with greater independence, that is the extent to which 'a student is able to exert his/her decision-making power over tasks related to their learning' (Moore 1997: 31, Shin 2002: 127).

Shin developed Moore's discussion of learner interaction with the institution. She agreed that the quality of interactions was more important than the number, and stressed the value of interpersonal relationships in distance education (Shin 2002: 122). For Shin, transactional presence was 'to be concerned with the degree to which a distance student perceives the *availability of*, and *connectedness with*, teachers, peer students and institution (Shin 2002: 132, our emphasis). Here, 'availability' is the ability of the institution to meet the needs and desires of students on request. 'Connectedness' is the student's belief that s/he has a reciprocal relationship with tutors, peers and the institution. Connectedness to the University is important for distance students who are more reliant on outward-facing technologies, such as online enrolment systems and library interfaces where there is little personal support for technical difficulties or the student is unsure of how to use them. We wanted to develop a course based on high-quality dialogue, with appropriate support, where students felt connected to tutors and their peers.

We drew, too, on Holmberg's approach and philosophy for supporting learners studying at a distance: a feeling of belonging was as integral to effective distance education as interactions related to subject learning (1989: 163). Holmberg argues that empathy between students and University staff is central to teaching and learning when tutoring at a distance (1989: 162). With this in mind the course is designed a small, consistent team of academics and administrators, available to support teaching and learning. The Course Leader and Examinations Tutor between them undertake the pastoral care of all the students. It is important to the success of the course that both have experience of part-time study whilst fully employed and raising families, and therefore have an empathetic understanding of the difficulties faced by part-time students with family commitments and full-time jobs.

Meeting the needs of adult learners

The course structure was also influenced by the work of Creanor (2002), who described the difficulties of tutoring adults who were juggling events and relationships in their daily lives as well as the pressures and time constraints of work. On the other hand, adult tend to have a greater understanding of what they want to achieve from education and have clearer goals in mind (Richardson, Long, and Woodley 2003). Because the course was focused particularly on those working in educational management or administration, the course had also to value and incorporate the existing knowledge, expertise and experience of a diverse group of students. We found the six premises developed by Knowles, Holton, and Swanson in their formulation of andragogy particularly useful (1998).

Learners' self-concept, *the role of learners' experiences*, and *orientation to learning* were particularly useful during the design phase of the course; *need to know*, *readiness to learn*, and *motivation* have gained in importance during course delivery. Adults are largely responsible for their own decisions in daily life; however, they frequently expect to be passive learners. Yet treating adults as passive learners is at odds with their expectations of

being self-directing. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson referred to this as the *learners' self-concept*:

> 'As adult educators become aware of this problem, they make efforts to create learning experiences in which adults are helped to make the transition from dependent to self-directing learners' (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson 1998: 65).

The course team therefore focused on appropriate academic skills, flexible learning outcomes appropriate for a range of educational contexts, and robust mechanisms for student support. Flexible learning outcomes also encourage the consideration of *the role of the learners' experiences* and *orientation to learning* in summative assessment , allowing students to contextualize their learning within their own workplace experience. Teaching methods including group discussions, case methods, problem solving and peer support integrated learning and student experiences in both face-to-face and online environments.

Analysis of the course

The course is based in a university School of Education. Students attend six days each academic year, forming the central foci for strategies for learning and teaching strategies. Day schools require the cooperation of the employer: day release allows students to spend a day of concentrated study at the university, a flexible model that accommodates the priorities of both students and employers. Each academic year is designed around four modules, three taught at the university where each module is offered through two dayschools. The fourth module is work-based supervised by a university tutor. The course has achieved consistently good retention, progression and achievement (around 95%), well above the average for part-time foundation degrees, through extensive use of the course VLE and other accessible technologies. Course effectiveness and relevance is monitored through interviews with students and their line managers.

The first dayschool ranges from tutor-led activities to other modes of learning aimed at fostering a transactional presence amongst students. Tutors outline the module content and assessment, orientate students around the VLE exercises and discussion boards, and confirm administrative structures. Subject-specific learning focuses on contextualising theory in practice through group discussions, supported by tutor and peer feedback. These activities allow the development of a rapport and the establishment of initial relationships between tutors, students and peers, providing a solid foundation for building on during the course. Tutors discuss the feelings of isolation that studying at a distance can have and remind students that it is difficult to know when an individual is struggling unless students communicate that to them. Students are continually encouraged to maintain contact and the use of open communication is stressed at each dayschool, including reminders about the range of institutional support services available, such as library support and academic skills tutors. These actions encourage students to keep 'connected' to tutors and maintain a dialogue, whilst developing a growing understanding of the wider university. Students understand the importance of these strategies, leading one (for example) to suggest that others should

> *'not fall into the trap of being isolated, go on to the VLE discussion board to get support from tutors and peers to discuss issues around distance studying. Tutors keep you motivated and give you a gentle push to achieve the best you can'.*

Although students may be studying at a distance using a VLE, it is nonetheless just as important that their learning is structured along traditional lines, particularly for those returning to formal education after a break. The day schools provide an initial framework for that structure, but are separated by a number of weeks in which students might become disorientated. Each module has therefore been designed to include small, weekly tasks designed to be completed easily during a lunch break, and therefore called 'lunch-time' activities. They are based on the VLE, utilising in particularly the asynchronous discussion

board, blogging tool and wiki. Activities take approximately twenty minutes and include such tasks as wider reading, structured reflection on podcasts, completion of quizzes, and notes on their observations of organisational behaviour. Each activity involves some feedback, however small, which can be commented on or discussed by tutors and peers.

Schedule for delivery

Week	Topic	Assessment/Activity	Day School
1	Studying as a Mature Student	Introductory Activity	Day School 1 - Complete Study Timetable Activity
2	How to produce a piece for on-line discussion	Planning Your Study Timetable! Complete the enclosed document and tell everyone when/where/how you will study on the discussion board.	
3	How You Learn!	Learning Styles Questionnaire Learning Styles Scoring	
4	Improve Your Learning Style	Work towards first part of assement - Commentry on own learning style.	Day School 2 - Learning Styles Activities, Guide to Harvard Referencing
6	The Harvard Referencing System		
8	How to Write a Seminar Paper		Day School 3 - Seminar Paper Practice!

Figure 1: Schedule for delivery.

Activities undertaken at the first day school and follow-up tasks contained on the VLE provided an illustration of our approach to structured learning through activities, through the development of academic skills at the beginning of the course (Figure 1). The learning activities have been carefully designed to ensure a manageable weekly workload. For example, the first weekly activity invites students to consider the opportunities and difficulties of studying through blended learning. In the second week, students develop a study timetable, an activity discussed and planned at the first day school, which is posted on the course discussion board for peer feedback. This activity aims to improve students' motivation by stimulating thinking about the opportunities afforded by mode of study as well as about how barriers to study may be overcome. The production of a study plan allows the tutor to initiate debate about approaches to study whilst monitoring students' engagement with the activity. The value of the approach was expressed by a student who wrote that

> 'Developing a timetable has helped greatly improve my approach to study and the structured nature of the VLE allowed me to pick a convenient time to study that fits into work and home life'.

The course is flexibly structured in order to enable students to access and study online content and activities as they progress through modules, balancing academic workload with external competing pressures. The day schools foster dialogue, student autonomy and connections with the wider university in supporting the development of transactional presence. Both formative and summative assessment tasks are designed to encourage *the learners' self concept*, *the role of learners' experiences*, and *orientation to learning.*

Course assessment

The careful structure of teaching and learning nonetheless allows a great deal of learner autonomy in formative and summative assessments. This autonomy is derived from the learning outcomes of each module which have been designed to allow learners to contextualize broader theory and practice within case studies drawn from their own organisation. At least half the assessment tasks for each module, both formative and summative, is therefore work-based. One primary school head teacher described the utility of the approach by explaining how

> 'the work-based project allowed Deborah and I (sic) to plan a project relevant to the School's needs to meet the requirements of whole school self-evaluation. This gave her an overview of a school-wide procedure and has helped to change her from an office worker into a strong member of the senior leadership team'.

The formative assessment tasks of the Human Resources module provides an example of learning outcomes in a work-based context. Students analyse a particular human resource procedure within their organisation, and the assessment process includes peer support from other students. They submit an outline of current procedure in their organisation, together with the theories or debates that will inform their study, and the potential benefits and difficulties that may result from their proposed revisions. The plans are posted on discussion boards on the VLE and each student is required to comment on three other plans. Their comments should outline their own experiences of the proposed procedure in their own organisation, thus providing each student with immediate feedback on practical issues within a variety of educational contexts. The exchange of dialogue offers excellent peer support and guidance. At the same time, the submission of plans on the discussion boards allow tutors to discuss the value of theory and debates identified by students. The summative assessment requires students to produce a report based around the feedback received from their plans. The day schools providing some of the scaffolding for assessed tasks. Assessment requirements are outlined at each module's first day school with formative assessment submitted before the second day school, allowing tutors to incorporate general feedback into the face-to-face session. The summative assessment for each module is generally submitted at the beginning of the following module in order to discourage students from working on a number of assessments concurrently.

Effective use of basic educational technologies is vital in teaching adult learners contending with the influence of daily events, the pressures and time constraints of work, and the distance between tutors, students and peers. Assessment and feedback on the course were therefore designed to be time-efficient. The discussion board was an ideal forum to support such activities given its asynchronous nature as it allows students to contribute at their convenience, within the assessment time-frame. The course makes effective use of screen capture software to facilitate poster presentations. Students record themselves explaining their posters and using the mouse pointer to help to illustrate their points. Presentations can be included without taking up a great amount of face-to-face time, can be shared amongst peers for review and comment, and are time-efficient for tutors to mark and moderate. Students have remarked positively on the speed with which they receive feedback is received allowing more time to action the comments and integrate study more effectively into their working lives. Students are encouraged to submit formative assessment, such as plans for assignments, by e-mail attachment. Once received, the word processor's comments and reviewing features are used to provide specific, individual feedback that students can action quickly after sending their work.

On the other hand, the notion of tutor 'availability' provided some tensions. It required the course team to consider how to be available and supportive of students whilst being mindful of tutors' competing pressures and the aim of developing capable, autonomous learners. Online support is therefore scheduled twice weekly in tutors' diaries, resembling a more conventional timetabled teaching session.

Student support

A key method of fostering a transactional presence is to keep formal and informal communications open. Students are continually reminded, at day schools and via e-mail, to keep in touch with regard to general queries and the course team are 'copied in' to e-mail communications with wider university support systems. There are tensions here between rising tutor workloads and the aims of developing independent learners; getting the balance right can sometimes be difficult. An open communication system that encourages dialogue can be time-consuming at the start of the course, but can save time in subsequent years as f students learn what is expected of them whilst studying at university.

The phrasing of online communications to encourage dialogue is an important factor in helping students feel connected to the course. The phrasing of online communications can be pivotal in maintaining communication, even at pressurized times. Simple phrases at the end of an e-mail are good examples: 'do you understand what I mean?', 'is this your understanding of this concept/theory?', or even, 'please get in touch with me if you are unsure'. Quite simply, any statement that keeps the door of communication open is valuable. As students say:

> *'You never feel you are on your own, there is someone at the end of the phone, or email. You have got friends you meet along the way who all support each other through the discussion board which is an easy way of communicating with your fellow students. Whatever you need there is someone there to support you'.*

Similar issues have been raised in work on engagement and dialogue in online counselling. Haberstroh researched college counsellors' use of informal language in online communication and explored student perceptions of their expertness (2010). His particular area of interest was 'mirroring' the tone and style of the sender's message when responding, in the same way that people mirror body language if they feel comfortable in each other's presence. A similar approach is as beneficial online: greetings and pleasantries can be mirrored, and if chatty or quick and to the point communications can also be reflected. Tutors professionalism and expertness was nonetheless challenged if the message received was overtly informal, perhaps even written in 'text' speech. Getting the balance right is important in maintaining a dialogue with students.

It can be difficult for tutors to know when a student is struggling or disengaged. A series of methods monitors students' engagement as they progress through the academic year in order to help to identify such students. Each method is itself monitored on a monthly basis and provides a record of both academic and personal information, including:

•   An e-mail folder for each student saves every message that is exchanged, and is kept in a shared area of the network to allow each tutor access;

•   A log recording the date and a brief summary of content of any telephone conversation, also accessible by each tutor;

•   Analysis of the VLE tracking system allows tutors to see which sections of the VLE each student has entered and records the number of 'mouse clicks' taken within each (Figure 2).

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Overall Summary of Usage				
2					
3	Access/Application				
4		Content Area	Discussion Board	Announcements	Total
5	Student A	33	11	6	50
6	Student B	41	3	11	55
7	Student C	65	7	16	88
8	Student D	8	35	6	49
9	Student E	52	37	11	100
10	Student F	63	15	1	79
11	Student G	26	12	6	44
12	Student H	27	0	1	28
13	Student I	56	31	14	101
14	Student J	74	24	14	112
15	Student K	5	0	9	14
16	Student L	7	21	16	44
17	Total	457	196	111	
18					

Figure 2: The VLE tracking system.

The VLE tracking system provides data that can be valuable for tutors in giving some insight into students' study habits. The sample spreadsheet shows a group's use of the VLE during a module and provides some basic data about the sections of the VLE visited by students. The spreadsheet shows students spend more time in the content areas than in the discussion forums. Perhaps this is a result of the content of the module and this kind of information therefore has its limitations, although it can also highlight potential problems. For example, during a recent monthly review we noticed that a particular student (K) had made no e-mail or phone contact nor had that student accessed the VLE. The student's e-mail folder revealed that the student was shortly moving house and would try to maintain the course of study. The tutor was then able to email the student to ask about progress on the course and how the house move was going. This type of personal communication was only possible because of the monitoring mechanisms and the student quickly re-engaged. Another student (H) has been in the content area but not the discussion board, and is useful background information to communications with the student. The spreadsheet represents a small student cohort for illustrative purposes, however, these methods of student monitoring are more effective with large group sizes, where it is harder for tutors to know each student individually.

Conclusion

Educational management and administration is fast becoming a graduate occupation. The course described here has been developed to meet both student and employer needs, both in its structure and in its assessment, student support and an emphasis on empathetic tutoring. The approach has promoted a constructive dialogue providing 'connectedness' between tutors, students and peers. Flexible course delivery fosters the development of independence in learners who are encouraged not only to draw on their work and life experiences but also to reflect and analyse them on the basis of their wider academic learning. Transactional presence is pivotal to the success of the course.

References

Creanor, L. 2002. 'A tale of two courses: A comparative study of tutoring online'. *Open Learning* 17, 1: 57-68.

Haberstroh, S. 2010. 'College counsellors' use of informal language online: Student perceptions of expertness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness', *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking* 13, 4: 455-459.

Holmberg, B. 1989. *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*. London, Routledge.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F. and Swanson, R. A. 1998. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (5th edn). Woburn, Butterworth Heinemann.

Marsden, F. 2008. 'An evaluation of the impact on the participants and their workplace through professional development on the foundation degree in Educational Administration'. Unpublished Masters' dissertation, University of Huddersfield.

Moore, M. G. 1980. 'Independent study', in R. D. Boyd and J. W. Apps, eds., *Redefining the discipline of adult education*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass: 16-31.

Moore, M. G. .1989. 'Editorial: Three types of interaction', *American Journal of Distance Education* 3, 2: 1-7.

Moore, M. G. 1997. 'Theory of transactional distance', in D. Keegan, ed., *Theoretical Principles of Distance Education*. New York, Routledge: 22-38.

Richardson, J. T. E., Long, G. L. and Woodley, A. 2003. 'Academic engagement and perceptions of quality in distance education', *Open Learning* 18, 3: 223-244.

Shin, N. 2002. 'Beyond interaction: the relational construct of 'transactional presence'', *Open Learning* 17, 2: 121-137.