

Improving Service Quality in Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance education tutoring is often judged by students providing post-course evaluation style feedback. It is argued in this paper that this method of judging quality is basically flawed and the process of evaluating the quality of tutoring by post-course feedback alone, needs to be changed. We suggest that the process could be improved if the expectations of the students are gathered and considered by the tutor before the course begins. The service provided by distance education tutors can be improved if they investigate, reflect and respond to their students expectations of tutoring.

Key Words

Student Feedback, Quality Assurance, Student Expectations, Distance Education

Introduction

Distance education courses across Europe vary in the amount of contact that is arranged for the students to have with their appointed tutors (see Tait 1993). Some tutors will meet their students at designated tutorials relatively regularly to discuss and stimulate learning of specific course material, others never meet their students at all except through the medium of the marking dialogue or individual telephone, e-mail or letter contacts. This paper is aimed at tutors who have some tutor-student contact during the course and particularly at tutors taking first time students who are new to the distance learning experience.

How should tutors who want to improve the service they provide by responding to student needs go about it? Perhaps the ideas of Schon (1983) and his view of the reflective practitioner and a model of experiential learning described by Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) Fig 1, can help focus on what tutors might do. Both Schon and Kolb emphasise the importance of reflection and its ability to inform our understanding of what we experience. Schon argues that teachers should reflect upon their practice and by synthesising the experience of teaching with information from feedback they can move forward and provide more effective learning experiences

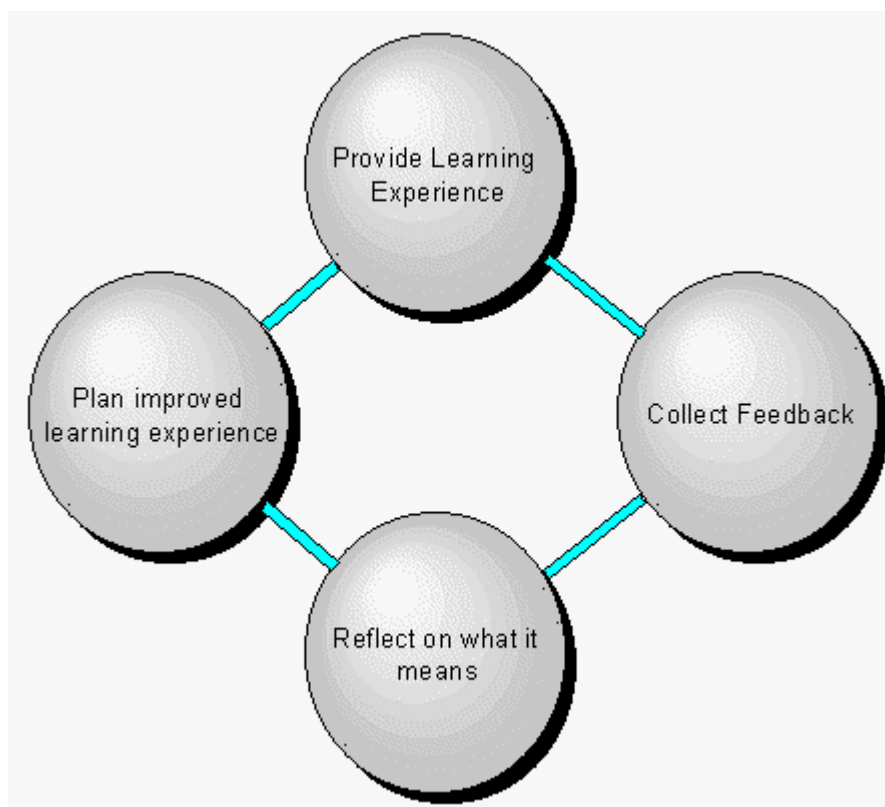


Fig 1: The Experiential Learning Cycle (adapted from Kolb 1984)

If one adds this idea to Kolb's learning cycle then the responsive tutor could be one who actively develops their teaching by : presenting a learning experience... gaining feedback ... reflecting on what it means...planning improvements to delivery... and presenting the next modified learning experience. This cycle of : (1) present... (2) gather in feedback ... (3) reflect on feedback... (4) plan improvement... (5) present again, is in effect a continuous quality improvement cycle. The key component of this cycle as it applies to distance tutors is the process by which feedback (ie student feedback) is collected and viewed.

We acknowledge the academic rationale for seeking post-course feedback as outlined by Marsh (1987) but for most distance tutors "gathering in feedback" means the post-course tutorial evaluation questionnaire. Here the tutor asks the students who have just completed the course, which aspects of the tutorials were valuable and which might be improved. Whether the tutor then does amend the delivery from that year to the next is very much left to individual tutor choice and circumstance. While some might argue that the tutor should amend the course in line with student evaluations we will argue that amending tutorial content on the basis of post-course evaluation may not improve satisfaction levels in the next cohort. While it might be useful to amend tutorial activities for a new cohort of students on the basis of comments made by students who have just completed the course, there is no guarantee that the changes will be better received. We think there is a more effective way for tutors to operate a quality improvement system on the service they deliver. We think that post-course evaluation used on its own is not the most effective way of improving a distance tutoring service and it is this concept of delivering a service that we now turn.

Delivering a service

To understand service delivery as a concept it is useful to consider the service literature that has developed in marketing and business. Service in those fields is equated with meeting or exceeding customer expectations. Valerie Zeithaml argues that unsuccessful service industries think "inside out". They think they know what their customer wants and they deliver that. They are unsuccessful because quite often what they thought the customer wanted was wrong. Successful service industries on the other hand think "outside in". They find out through market research what their customers say they want and then they deliver what the customer says they want. In other words the service provider finds out what their customer expects and then delivers to that standard or higher. In fact Zeithaml states quite succinctly that "knowing what a customer expects is probably the first and most critical step in delivering a quality service".

This kind of consumerist thinking seems alien to the principles around which education has traditionally operated. (see Thorne and Cuthbert 1996). The teacher has always been the expert and the student the novice, grateful for the few crumbs of understanding gleaned from the master's table. And it is difficult to turn it round and have the teacher take the role of non-expert seeking advice on teaching from the student. However that is what must happen if a tutor wishes to find out what they need to do to improve the service they provide. We are saying that tutors need to think "outside in". They need to frame their students as customers who need to have their expectations researched and managed.

Students as we already know, are increasingly being asked to make judgements on the quality of learning experience provided in the traditional university setting through course evaluation questionnaires. Quality

assurance is sweeping into distance education systems too. But we suggest that satisfaction with distance tutoring received will be directly linked to the expectations those students had of tutoring when they "signed on". Since the tutor rarely accesses student expectations of tutoring, they run the risk of being judged as ineffective tutors against the students' hidden expectations.

It seems illogical to have students judge a tutor's performance on criteria that are hidden from the tutor. If the tutor were given the student expectations before the course begins he/she would have the opportunity to consider how to meet justified suggestions or in cases where particular student expectations are unrealistic, explain and manage the expectations to realistic levels. In either event the tutor is able to work with, and respond to, the students' expectations. Consequently judgement by students of how well the tutor has performed would be fairer. There are other sound educational reasons why accessing students' expectations makes good sense:

- it helps tutor consider and respond to mismatched expectations
- students feel involved in the way the course is delivered, increasing their motivation
- students have good ideas about teaching and learning
- students can alert tutors to areas of anticipated difficulty where special help would be most effective.
- current students (not next cohort) benefit from the advice they give
- students and tutor take mid-course and post-course feedback process more seriously.

Eliciting student expectations, preferences, and dislikes.

An important element in our work (Stevenson and Sander 1997) has been distinguishing the difference between how students expect to be taught and how they would like, and not like, to be taught. We have used questionnaires, in tandem with in-depth face to face, as well as telephone, interviews. We have found three simple questions are very effective in accessing distance students' views on their tutoring expectations and preferences.

1. What teaching style do you expect your tutor to use at tutorial and why?
2. What teaching style would you prefer your tutor to use at tutorial and why?
3. What teaching style do you not want your tutor to use at tutorial and why?

We have found that many students are expecting to be taught in a way they would prefer not to be taught and many do not expect to be taught in the way they would like to be taught. We would stress that this information in itself does not improve tutoring. What it can do is give the tutor ideas about how a particular group of students, about to start a distance course, is more likely to learn better at a tutorial.

Using the ELPO model

The tutor who has tutoring responsibilities and wishes to respond to their student expectations may benefit from applying the Expectations Led Planned Organisation model (ELPO) to their tutoring (Table 1). In this model the tutor considers how the course might be structured and then accesses the student expectations of good tutoring (Stevenson Sander and Naylor 1997). The tutor interrogates his/her tutorial plan to see if it can be modified to accommodate specific student expectations or preferences and whether he/she can adjust activities that students suggest are disliked or not helpful to their learning. The amended teaching plan is circulated to students explaining why the activities have been selected. Evaluation of the tutoring plan can be gained from traditional post event or post course evaluation.

Table 1 The Expectations Led Planned Organisation (ELPO) Model (Adapted from Stevenson, Sander and Naylor 1997)

The ELPO model was designed to promote effective tutorial teaching in the style common to the Open University (UK). These courses typically are very constrained in the amount of contact teaching time between tutor and student and assumes 7-8 two hour tutorial sessions in a student's academic "year". This cycle is completed for each cohort of students.

Initial tutorial programme
1. The tutor, perhaps in consultation with other course tutors, prepares a programme of tutorials considered to be useful for the students.
Possible tutorial programme modification
2. The expectations of the students about to start the module are gathered. On the basis of these expectations alterations to the programme are considered.
Circulate agreed programme to students
3. An agreed plan for the tutorials is given to each student along with the rationale for that programme, making clear how students are expected to benefit.

4.	<p>Presentation and review of programme</p> <p>Where possible, students should be given the opportunity to evaluate the tutorials after each one has been presented. Where possible, the students' views for improvement should be accommodated in future tutorials. If it is not possible to accommodate them they should still be acknowledged.</p>
5.	<p>Final evaluation of the tutorial programme</p> <p>At the end of the module, the students' feelings should be gathered. It needs to be considered whether this is best done before or after assessment has taken place. If it is to be after assessment, it also has to be considered whether it should be done before or after feedback of results. The findings could be discussed with the course team and amendments for future delivery of the course considered.</p>

There are other ways perhaps to develop tutoring skills but the key to our approach is avoiding the trap of assuming "one tutoring style fits all" and once you learn the style all your tutoring worries are over. We think students are all different and they all respond to teaching in slightly different ways. We have found also that students beginning a distance course for the first time have different expectations (often wildly inaccurate) of what is required of them in comparison with more experienced students (Stevenson and Sander 1997). Some expectations and preferences may change in students as they progress, some may not. This is important. If a tutor wishes to work with student expectations he/she needs to access them every year. This suggests that to ensure tutor effectiveness the tutor needs to access student expectations and preferences each year from each new cohort of students. Each year the tutor will have new targets to set him/herself and each year his/her progress can be assessed from student evaluations of how well the expectations of the tutorial group were met or indeed exceeded.

Conclusion

We have argued here that both the tutor in distance education and the student can benefit from the process of accessing and responding to student pre-course expectations. The tutors can benefit from knowing before the course begins what their students expect of them. They then have the opportunity to adjust their tutoring style or manage the students' unrealistic expectations to a more appropriate level. The students benefit from sharing their concerns and expectations of service with the tutor who will be teaching them and shaping the way in which the service is provided. The end result should be greater satisfaction with, and improvement in, the quality of service delivery of distance education for all concerned.

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