

# Supporting supporters in open and distance learning

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## Abstract

The authors of this paper work in a small but expanding department within the University of Bradford which has a remit for multi-professional education for health care staff. A range of open and distance learning programmes are delivered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, all of which aim to meet the needs of clinical practitioners and health service managers.

Due to the increasing demand for open and distance learning and the desire to harness the benefits of a multi-professional approach (Davidson and Lucas 1995) some lecturers who are experienced in traditional forms of education delivery, are being offered their first opportunity to experience supporting open and distance learning students. This change in role presents a considerable challenge for many, requiring the development of new skills and approaches (Lewis 1992). However, skills developed in the open learning context are transferable and so can also be of benefit in more conventional teaching situations (Race 1989).

This paper explores the experiences of these first time open and distance learning tutors. Analysis of the findings will highlight a range of key issues that have impacted on their adaptation to the role. From this analysis recommendations for staff development will be presented.

## Introduction

Staff development should be integral to any professional role. Ideally, it should mirror the philosophy of an open and andragogical approach to education (Knowles 1970) with the employee being central and in control of the process. Successful staff development has the potential to increase the effectiveness of the individual on a personal basis and as a team member. It may also promote career development, increase job satisfaction and enable staff to manage and deliver new initiatives in a time of change. For these reasons it was identified by a recent government report as an essential element of Higher Education provision (Dearing 1997).

It is likely that there will always be a tension between the interests of personal development and organisational needs. However, an improvement in the quality of the student experience must remain central to the issue of staff development. With the current requirement for demonstrable quality in educational provision (Dearing 1997), it is now more important than ever before that policies and plans for resourcing and delivering staff development are in place.

Planning staff development is a cyclical process that can be divided into four stages; identifying needs; planning which incorporates prioritising and resourcing, implementation and evaluation (Knasel et al 1994). Involvement in the process will increase the level of ownership and commitment to the operation of staff development (Rogers 1983).

## Background

Two years ago the college of health in which we worked became part of the University of Bradford. The emphasis of staff development immediately became focussed on the development of research capabilities in order to enable lecturers to meet the requirements of a University lecturer, incorporating research activities with those of course management and teaching. Resources for staff development in relation to research capabilities were clearly identified and appeared to be in reasonable supply. This was advantageous to those who wished to pursue this pathway. For some however, the pressure to become involved in research activities caused anxiety and even anger. Some individuals felt that their developmental needs lay in other areas and thus found themselves fighting against what they perceived as inequalities in resource allocation.

As the demand for the ODL courses offered by the Division increased, so did the need for experienced facilitators of learning as opposed to traditional teachers. However, the range of subject matter being

offered was also developing and increasing and it became crucial that subject specialists from within the division and from within the School as a whole should be utilised. A range of teaching staff from the different backgrounds therefore became involved with the ODL at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. A strength of this approach was that the multi-professional nature of the teaching team mirrored that of the student population. The benefits of multi-professional education are clearly documented (Hughes and Lucas 1997) and this approach is central to the School's philosophy.

It was perceived that using subject specialists in this way might disadvantage students as they may have an ODL tutor who, despite being a qualified teacher with an excellent knowledge base and many years teaching experience, was new to ODL. The skills of small group facilitation, conducting telephone tutorials and assessment and providing detailed written feedback and guidance may not have been developed in these teachers. It was therefore decided to explore the experience of new ODL tutors with the aim of identifying their perceived needs as new tutors so that this could inform future approaches to staff development and support within the team. As the department is the primary focus for ODL delivery within the University as a whole, these development needs are very specific and would not therefore be met centrally. The aim was to develop a proposal for supporting new ODL tutors within our team.

## Methodology

Six members of staff from a range of ODL courses were interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Clear explanations about the reason for the discussions were given and informed consent was obtained, giving permission for any of the data obtained to be published. Confidentiality in terms of individual identity was assured and maintained at all times.

## Findings

Of the six members of staff interviewed, one had substantial experience as an open learning tutor, but no experience of distance education, whilst the remaining five had no experience of either.

Only one tutor had any formal preparation and this comprised only of a single study day delivered by the producers of the open learning materials. The remainder had no formal preparation but had all taken the responsibility for preparing themselves utilising a range of options. These included reading widely around the issues of ODL, discussing the concept with the programme leader and other staff, and attending a briefing meeting which addressed the programme design and administration details. In addition, three tutors had attended the student briefing day and had found it beneficial and all had familiarised themselves with the learning packs.

Many of the tutors gave positive accounts of their new experiences, these included the challenge of being involved in a new programme and the high level of commitment exhibited by the students. Some of the tutors had met each other informally and one had attended tutor support meetings, these were reported as positive aspects of their experience. Several interviewees however, expressed an appreciation for the very definite support that had been available to them from within the department. This was an interesting point because there are no formal support mechanisms in place, yet it appears that they are most certainly there. These support structures were discussed in various forms and ranged from "just knowing" that help was available if needed to a process resembling clinical supervision or mentorship which had evolved spontaneously.

When asked about negative experiences many of the insecurities discussed were based on administrative difficulties. It was recognised that ODL relies heavily on administration in order to be effective. A number of tutors however expressed anxiety around the issue of losing contact with students, one in particular described a feeling of "uselessness." This is a common feeling in the early days of ODL tutoring. Lack of confidence in one's own ability to respond to students' individual needs was also expressed by one tutor.

When asked what sort of preparation and support would have been useful to them, the tutors' replies ranged from nothing more than was available, i.e. the informal support structures, to "support of any kind" from another. Two tutors thought that having an overview of the whole programme in which they were involved would have enabled them to support students more appropriately. It was felt to be essential that not only were systems well established, but that tutors were fully briefed in how to access them.

Three tutors felt that some form of support group for ODL tutors would be beneficial. One tutor had been offered the option of observing an open learning tutorial but had declined the offer.

Open learning has been recognised in itself as a potential catalyst for staff development encouraging skills that are transferable to other forms of teaching (Race 1989). Tutors were therefore asked if their new experience had impacted on their traditional roles. An example of the responses was: "Tremendous. I have widened my expertise and approach to include a more supportive and less directive stance. I am no longer the be all and end all, but another resource for the students. I am more reflective."

Another respondent commented on her desire to develop the skills of reflection in her traditional students. It appears therefore from this small sample, that supporting tutors in their new role and empowering them to develop new transferable skills, may have a substantial effect on their wider educational practice. This is perhaps an area for further consideration.

## Recommendations

It was felt that any recommendations made had to be realistic and achievable within the scope of existing heavy workloads.

- One of the OL programmes offered by the department originally had a successful format for tutor support meetings. Due to the difficulties of finding convenient times for every body involved, these seem to have become almost extinct. The findings of this small study indicate that they should be resumed at the earliest possible date. Plans are therefore being made for their re-introduction. It is intended to make them open to all ODL tutors who are involved with programmes in the department. It is further proposed that the meetings should take on the role of action learning sets.
- The development of a staff handbook has been considered. There would be many benefits to this in that staff could take away the materials and read them in their own time, taking responsibility for their own learning. However, as there are copious amounts of literature available on ODL, it has been proposed that a departmental resource pack should be developed. It is hoped that all permanent members of the department will contribute to this pack on a regular basis, thus ensuring that it remains current.
- The concept of Mentorship has many definitions and titles, and may be referred to as preceptorship, supervision or buddying. Generally however, it tends to refer to an individual who is identified by another individual specifically to take on a supportive non-judgmental role. For the purpose of supporting tutors new to ODL it was felt that this would be an extremely beneficial development. Butterworth (1997) suggests that such an arrangement should be a fair, non-destructive process that develops the talent and potential of practitioners. The advantages of such a system have been described by Butterworth (1997) as enabling the practitioner to reflect critically whilst constantly modifying practice in the light of current research. Mentorship therefore, would appear to provide a much needed opportunity for the advancement of skills, support and staff development (Butterworth 1997).

Proposals have therefore been made to introduce the concept of formal mentorship within the division. In developing the system, care has been taken to include the provision of training for the mentors as required and the development of documentation that will focus the mentorship meetings on the needs of all stakeholders. Thus it will be possible to demonstrate that the quality of the service being provided is improving (Wolsey & Leach 1997). It is hoped that a system of formalised Peer review will evolve from the mentorship meetings. However, it is acknowledged that staff will need much support and guidance to take this step, it currently remains therefore, an ideal for the future.

This was a small study confined to our own area of practice. It has enabled us to identify needs and make proposals for change that will improve and develop our practice and that of our colleagues. These proposals will be subject to review and approval by the departmental team. The implementation of these changes will be subject to continual evaluation, reflection and subsequent development to ensure that the needs of all ODL staff members and students alike are being met.

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