Supporting Students by Telephone: a Technology for the Future of Student Support?

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Abstract

Student support by telephone has a long tradition in open and distance learning, but most recent research and discussion has concentrated on support by electronic means. Some recent findings however provide evidence that the telephone is still a particularly effective medium for student support. Four types of telephone contact are discussed which indicate that the appropriate and timely use of telephones can aid student retention, provide excellent opportunities for dialogue and is perceived as particularly encouraging by students. The use of the increasingly common mobile phone for student contact, particularly in countries without reliable landlines, also has huge potential; and textmessaging can be used by both institutions and tutors to support students.

Keywords

student support; retention; telephone support; mobile phones; proactive contact

Introduction

Is the telephone a neglected technology in open and distance learning? Telephones are still used an enormous amount by both students and their tutors but have only recently become again the subject of critical analysis and research, mainly in the context of mobile phones and 'mLearning' (Keegan 2002). Maybe this is to be expected; they have become so integral to the ways in which tutors and students interact with each other and with their institution, that nothing more needs to be said.

Of course it is the case that not all distance students have access to land line telephone systems, nor on a regular basis to the use of mobile phones. In 1999 Kofi Annan could say that: 'A quarter of all countries have not yet achieved even a basic level of access to telecommunications — a teledensity of 1, or 1 telephone for every 100 people. Half the world's people have never made or received a telephone call' (Annan 1999).

Recently on-line communication has attracted most researchers and distance education commentators. But the use of mobile phones is extensive and its application for student support has attracted increasing interest and research and has been the subject of EU funding.

We suggest it is worth pausing to review current research and reflect on whether there is more to learn about institutional and tutor-student interaction using the telephone rather than just assume that most interaction for the future will be on-line, whether synchronous or asynchronous.

Early research

The very first edition of *Teaching at a distance* (1974), the precursor of Open Learning, included two articles on teaching by telephone: one by John Short Teaching by Telephone: *The problems of teaching without the visual channel* (Short 1974); and one of a more practical nature by Odette L'Henry-Evans *Teaching by Telephone: some practical observations* (L'Henry-Evans 1974). Even before that time, Rao and Hicks reported from a very small scale project in North America that 'students learn as much or more in telephone conversations as in face-to-face situations' (Rao and Hicks 1972).

Three years later, in 1977, Ben Turok, then a Senior Counsellor in the London region of the Open University (and incidentally now an ANC member of parliament in South Africa) contributed to the debate in an article *Telephony - a passing lunacy or a genuine innovation?* Turok was very clear. 'There can be little doubt that correspondence is the best vehicle for degree level distance study' (Turok 1977). However, he goes on to explore the weaknesses of purely correspondence teaching pointing out the lack of synchronous interaction. Turok quotes research evidence from Sweden that 77% of students found telephone teaching 'very helpful'; and Davies (1976) at the University of Linkoping also in Sweden, who had used individual telephone calls to teach English at a distance, reported that 91% of students gave telephone teaching the highest rating on a 5 point scale. He added that 'there is little doubt, especially in the case of more reserved or weaker students, that they speak more connected English in the course of these telephone conversations than they would in many hours of normal so called 'contact' teaching where they are always members of a larger group'(Davies 1976).

Throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, despite difficulties with inadequate technology, both in terms of connections and in terms of the quality of the actual telephones, a significant amount of teaching and student support by telephone took place across the world. Despite the amount of attention paid to on-line learning with its lack of both aural and visual cues, there is still a vast amount of telephone interaction, with a solely aural channel, which attracts very little research except in the context of mobile phones which have particular limitations. And despite some early training materials for tutors on making best use of the telephone and chapters in developmental materials, it is only in 2003 that the Open University UK has produced an Open Teaching Toolkit for its part-time staff on *Supporting Students by Telephone* (Gaskell et al 2003) - two years after a similar Toolkit on CMC (Computer mediated communication) was made available.

The rest of this paper reviews some recent research which analyses the way in which institutions and students use the phone to support students in their studies and then moves on to consider the value of the

mobile phone with its text messaging facilities for student support, both in the developed world and in those countries with very few resources.

Student support by telephone

It is useful to differentiate between four broad types of telephone support and tuition, in addition to reactive contact between institution and individual student:

- Proactive contact between institutions and individual student
- Proactive contact between tutor and individual student
- Responsive contact between tutor and individual student
- Planned 'tutorials' by phone, whether with a group or an individual

It is also important to take into account the individual nature of the contact in the latter three types which in itself may be a major factor in students' appreciation of this activity. Indeed it could be argued that individual support and contact, whether on-line, by correspondence or by telephone is the essence of effective support in distance education. Individual support is also, of course, more costly.

Proactive contact from the Institution: retention issues

Recent research within the Open University and elsewhere has demonstrated the importance of telephone contact in student induction, retention and performance on course. Since Tinto wrote about 'institutional departure' in 1993 (Tinto 1993), 'integration' into the institution, in both social and academic terms, has been recognised as a key element in student retention. Contact by telephone seems to be particularly effective in aiding this integration in ODL. Simpson reports on a project in which 800 students new to the Open University were contacted by telephone early in the year with an offer of support and encouragement. A later check on the students' progress halfway through the course indicated that the retention rate for these students was 4.5% higher than for a control group of students who were not contacted (Simpson 2003a). Pre-course telephone contact to those who have reserved a place on a course has also had a significant impact on student recruitment: the conversion rate from reservation to full registration on a course was 5.4% higher for those who were contacted than for those who were not contacted. The Open University UK has now developed a national strategy for the recruitment and retention of students which will involve telephone contact at six key points in a student's year.

Similar findings have been reported from elsewhere: Simpson cites Case and Elliott's study of Rio Salado College in Arizona (1997) in which 'between two and five calls were made to targeted students starting within two weeks of the course start…they found that between two and five calls were most effective and that students receiving that number of calls were 15-20 % more likely to be retained' (Simpson 2003a). Ohio State University used 'telecounsellors' to make proactive contact with enquirers and students and build positive relationships through one-to-one dialogues and reported a 4% increase in retention between targeted and control groups of about 8000 students each (Mager 2003).

Proactive contact from the tutor

Research in the Open University UK indicates that students prefer to be contacted by their tutor when this is possible and Gibbs reports on the significant impact early contact from a student's own tutor can have (Gibbs 2002). In a survey of 2638 OU UK students, 1346 received contact from their tutor before their first assignment as a matter of University policy rather than by chance or as a matter of choice. The results were that students contacted by their tutors were more likely to submit the first assignment and more likely to receive higher grades. Telephone contact was also more likely to be perceived as encouraging when compared with letters, emails or computer conferencing and so seems to be the most effective medium for this initial support.

Responsive contact from the tutor

One of the early issues discussed in relation to telephone contact was difficulties encountered by lack of visual cues. Since then CMC, in particularly email, has become a very common means of communication which shares the lack of a visual dimension and also lacks an aural dimension. It is of interest, then to compare ways in which students and tutors interact when these two media are both available. Kaye (2002) discusses a project from the OU UK's Cambridge centre in which tutors were asked to compare their own and their students' use of phone and email as two 'distance' methods of communication over six months and then join a focus group to discuss issues that arose. Tutors generally agreed that the phone was a particularly appropriate medium for dealing with difficulties over course content and for engaging in a dialogue. Tutors reported both pedagogical and practical benefits of using the phone, although phone calls tended to take longer: 'By phone you can throw out questions - there's much less of you telling them the answers'; 'What can be covered in a single phone call can extend over several emails' (Kaye 2002).

Planned 'tutorials' over the phone

The Open University in the UK is increasingly using telephone tutorials to support students on relatively low population courses which draw from a large geographical area and has used them for many years for students who are remotely located, for instance in the Scottish islands. Many of these use a version of conference calling and have been highly valued by students.

More recently the Open University has introduced level 1 Access courses - the Openings programme (http://www3.open.ac.uk/widening-participation/p4_1.asp) - which are supported entirely by telephone. Students are allocated to a tutor who phones and negotiates dates for telephone tutorials and the submission of assignments. The programme has been very successful in a number of ways: by attracting students who might not otherwise have studied at Higher Education level; encouraging students to continue with degree level work by registering for an undergraduate course; successfully complete their first year in an undergraduate programme; and register for a further course the following year. There was, for instance, a 10% difference between numbers of Openings students and other new students who continued to register when they had completed their first 'conventional' OU level 1 course. 90% of Openings students surveyed in 2001 felt that telephone contact was sufficient as the main source of support; it also seems to have been perceived as particularly helpful in enhancing confidence before undertaking a conventional OU undergraduate course with face-to-face tutorials: ' I can now meet other students at the tutorial. I don't think that I was ready for that when I was doing Openings' (Allen & Sutton 2001). This confirms the findings from earlier research from the Open College in Canada, where Norquay (1986) reports that a large number are held back 'by low self-esteem. Open College students can test their abilities in private. By the time they go to a study weekend to mingle with other students, they have had feedback from their tutors and their confidence has begun to build'.

A current research project (Curry et al 2003) is investigating (among other issues) the role that telephonic communication can play in helping inexperienced students become familiar with the academic discourse and conventions of their chosen subject and develop proficiency in 'academic literacy'. The provision of a series of tutorials allows tutors to introduce academic concepts gradually. One tutor reports that his approach is to 'start off very informally, sort of ordinary discourse and move towards academic discourse slowly and incrementally'.

The development of academic discourse at a distance in mathematical subjects can be particularly well handled by phone if the tutor is aware of the potential difficulties, In the UK, for instance, many new students are unfamiliar with Greek characters used in mathematical notation (eg λ, θ) and need help in developing expertise in referring to them correctly (Gaskell et al 2003).

New technology and telephonic communication: mobile phones

Technological changes are very rapid and impact on different countries in different ways, so while there have been huge developments in various telephone conferencing systems, we will look here at the educational potential of the increasingly common mobile phone.

The number of mobile phones around the world now exceeds 1.25 billion - a global penetration rate of more than 20%. Some European countries have now reached market saturation: Luxembourg, for example, had a penetration rate of more than 110% at the end of 2002; and the UK was high on the list with 83% (New Statesman 2003). The EU Leonardo da Vinci programme supported a project on the use of mobiles in educational contexts (Keegan 2002).

Mobile phones can already provide access to the internet and email. In the (possibly near) future it looks likely that mobile phones will be able to provide opportunities for telephone conferencing with a visual channel and so remove one of the initial difficulties associated with telephone support.

In countries with a good landline phone infrastructure, mobile phones can be relatively expensive to use, but they can also provide a vital medium for contact between student, tutor and institution.

It is in developing countries that the potential for the use of mobile phones in an educational context is of critical importance. Recent research from the University of Pretoria shows that, of 1,900 students enrolled on a distance education programme only 0.4% had access to email, while 99% had access to cell/mobile phones and so text messages could be used effectively (Viljoen 2003, Brown forthcoming 2004). The fastest growing markets for mobile phones are in Africa, the Middle East and parts of eastern Europe. The Nigerian market, for instance, grew by 369% in 2002 (New Statesman 2003).

Text messaging

In September 2002, mobile phone users in the UK sent an average of two million text messages per hour (Guardian Newspaper 22 October 2002, cited in Simpson, 2003a). It is also clear that it is younger people who are the main users of text messaging. In Finland in the early 1990s, for example, mobile phones were seen as the 'preserve of the professional classes...and known as the "yuppie bear". As mobile phones spread from the professional classes to youth culture, Finnish teenagers began to refer to the device as kanny, a Nokia trademark that means 'an extension of the hand' (New Statesman 2003).

Research from the OU, the University of Pretoria and the Leonardo project indicates some of the ways in which textmessaging can best be used for student support in the context of Open and Distance Learning. These include reminders about time-sensitive events, for example, the content and timing of assignments and tutorials; information about additional resources or events (for instance a lunar eclipse for an OU UK astronomy course, or a relevant television programme); flagging current concerns which may need response in a different medium ('I am struggling please phone'- OU UK). The University of Pretoria used bulk messaging to provide basic administrative support and Brown (forthcoming 2004) reports some major successes: in response to a reminder for registration, 58% registered before the closing date compared to the normal expectation of below 40%. He concludes that 'm-learning is the gateway to e-learning for most learners in Africa as the rapidly growing wireless infrastructure increasingly fulfils their access needs'. It is clear however, that textmessaging alone may be of limited use in providing some kinds of student support, for instance detailed academic discussions or reassurance whether cognitive or affective. The OU project concludes that, given the current student and tutor profile, text messaging may be most appropriate for centralised reminders rather than for individualised tutor-student exchanges which may be more effectively handled in other media (Simpson 2003b). However, this is a less realistic option in other parts of the world.

Telephone support: implications of current research

The research cited above indicates that telephones have a major role to play in student support and are indeed the best medium to choose for student contact on many occasions. Evidence from this research indicates that

- The key area for developing student support is in countries with a high level of access to mobile phones and low access to computers
- Textmessaging can be very important in some contexts but has limitations in terms of extended student support
- Rapid advances in technology will enhance the use of telephones for support in the future
- Proactive contact with students at an early stage has a significantimpact on student integration and retention
- Students may find telephone communications more encouraging than other media, such as email, letter or computer conference
- Telephone conversations provides a real opportunity for a dialogue with students and to develop students' academic discourse
- Mixed use of media can provide the most helpful source of support, depending on the nature of the contact and the individual student; tutors may need staff development to develop their professional expertise in this area

Further research

These findings also raise a range of issues worth further investigation and research:

- Is proactive contact by telephone from the institution or tutor more or less powerful than contact by email?
- How much group telephone tuition is taking place across Europe/the world? Has it been mainly superseded by synchronous and asynchronous online activity?
- Do students and tutors need to be trained to use the telephone? Or is it just a matter of common sense?
- Which institutions proactively contact students in danger of dropping out?
- Is there much use of systems which combine the visual and aural/oral channels such as the OU UK's Lyceum system?
- What role do mobile phones have in the future in countries with a good landline infrastructure?

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