Preparing Tutors for Online Collaborative Learning at the Open University Malaysia

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Abstract: To be more effective, open and distance learning programmes should incorporate collaborative learning environments with the purpose of engaging learners in the learning process. This will eventually develop into a learning community that would help, among others, to reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation commonly felt among distance learners. A study to determine the perceptions of tutors on online collaborative learning, particularly in how tutors viewed online collaborative learning at the Open University Malaysia (OUM) was conducted. Their online pattern of collaboration was also determined. The paper highlights the research and its findings and provides suggestions on future training of the tutors to help ensure the success of online collaborative learning at the university. The findings will be useful to those who are designing tutor training programmes for online collaborative learning.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Tutor Training, Open Distance Learning

Introduction

The study aimed to evaluate the preparation of tutors for an effective online collaborative environment at the Open University Malaysia (OUM). In particular, the study sought to determine, for the first time, the perceptions on online collaborative learning among OUM tutors, the pattern of online collaboration and to determine whether online collaboration led to improved understanding of the subject matter as perceived by the tutors. The study was conducted for the first time among a selected group of trained tutors. The findings of the study were expected to contribute to the effectiveness of future tutor training programmes.

OUM is Malaysia’s first open distance learning institution who registered its first group of students in August 2001. At the time of the study, there were about 450 tutors serving some 6,400 students. OUM was then offering its sixth semester. With three student intakes a year, the number of tutors and students have grown exponentially; from 450 to 1,200 tutors and from 6,400 to almost 19,000 students within a year from the time of the study. Online collaborative learning is one of the University’s three modes of learning: face-to-face tutorials, online collaborative learning and self-managed learning.

The Role of Online Collaborative Learning in Distance Education

At the OUM, online collaborative learning is viewed as a process whereby two or more parties support each other in attaining the other party’s learning goal. More specifically, the process of online collaborative learning starts with the tutor posing a relevant and discussive question for learners to think and reflect. Following this, learners are expected to contribute further by posting their opinions, experiences and concluding on the question posed. While some learners will be more active in contributing to the online discussions, others may feel more comfortable reading their peers’ contributions and elaborating upon them but there will also be learners who have little
confidence in making an online presence. In such instances, the tutor is expected to motivate and bring these learners into the scene.

Research has indicated the benefits of online collaborative learning. According to Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000), students in distance education programs, though physically separated, can gain a sense of togetherness as they share and clarify ideas, actively contribute to a team, and cooperatively solve problems. With this, the mental make-up of the online tutor is crucial, as a positive mental make-up will ensure success of online learning. In a study of nurses embarking on a distance learning programme, students felt that online discussions were appropriate in that it will develop critical thinking among students (Abas, 2003). They added that participation in online discussions allow students to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. They liked being able to stay in communication with their course mates and lecturers throughout the semester.

In open and distance learning environments, online collaboration is seen as crucial to help learners reach their target goals quickly as well as leverage on their prior knowledge and hands on experiences. It is a way of making learners belong to a community of practitioners, whereby their total acquired knowledge helps in further development of the individual. Further, online collaborative learning helps in identifying learner presence and support belongingness. However, few studies have been conducted that examine the impact of the collaborative teaching/learning model in the distance-education setting (Hardwick, 2000). In a study by Pilkington (1988), it was reported that despite a low-key presence of online tutors, there was a marked effect on discourse. Some other research approaches had examined how participants in a collaborative environment support each other and conditions under which such situations are achieved (Dilenbourgh, Baker, Blaye and O’Malley, 1996; Baker, deVries and Lund, 1999). The online tutor has six very important roles to play: to model effective learning, track learner discussions, provide expert knowledge, motivate learners, provide the technology support and support the learner in language related issues (Abtar, 2001). Where interactions are concerned, tutors should guide students on how to capitalize on each other’s strengths.

Thus it is imperative that the social aspects of successful collaborative teams be explicitly taught and this may include taking an interest in team members knowledge beyond the institutional curriculum specifications, appreciating that peers can provide their tacit knowledge only through active questioning methodologies and a willingness to share individual ideas. Robbins and Finley (1995) have the following as qualities that should be present in online tutors in promoting effective peer collaboration: an ability to specify personal goals, willingness to confront conflict positively, an ability to understand the other person’s perspective, and a readiness to celebrate accomplishments. The tutor should be seen as a facilitator and not a moderator as aptly forwarded by Cox, Clark, Heath and Plumpton (2000) whereby they distinguish the facilitator and moderator role as such: The main perception of moderator is control and power whereas the key perception of facilitator is fellow learner with a unique role to co-ordinate the interaction (p.27). According to Durling, Cross & Johnson, 1996; Mason 1998; Goodfellow, 1999, Salmon 1999, and Cox, Heath & Plumpton, 2000) the online tutor should progressively encourage students to take charge of online learning. They can be asked to play the role of the facilitator like leading a discussion topic, or summarizing key points after some amount of discussion has been carried out.

Hence, for reasons above, OUM had identified online collaborative learning to be an essential part of the learning process. It has also allocated at least five percent of the course assessment to be awarded to active and successful participation of students in the online discussions. OUM plans to increase the marks for active online discussions but only when it is assured that both students and tutors are ready. It is imperative that OUM prepares its tutors and students well to embrace online collaborative learning. Some of the issues that need to be addressed include the tutor’s perception and roles. Tutors should have a positive attitude towards this new mode of learning and are able to understand what their roles are in the online environment. It is also important to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of online collaborative learning by analyzing the pattern of postings to a discussion topic.

**The Study**

The study was conducted among 96 tutors who attended a colloquium for Open and Distance Tutors at the main campus. They were selected based on their past performance from among the 450 tutors. The colloquium aimed to reinforce earlier tutor training sessions. The questionnaires were distributed to all the 96 tutors at the end of the colloquium. Sixty-eight tutors responded to the questionnaires. The response rate was 71%. The questionnaire was
developed along three research questions: (a) How did tutors view online collaborative learning? (b) What was the pattern of online collaboration? (c) Did online collaborative learning contribute to improved understanding of content knowledge? The first research question sought to determine how far tutors understood the process of collaborative learning and how much they agree in terms of its effectiveness as an important component of learning at OUM. An item to address how much they knew of what was expected of them in the online collaborative environment was also included. Tutors were also asked how much they enjoyed posting messages, how frequently they read messages posted by their tutees and whether there were a variety of postings. The second research question was aimed at determining the general pattern of online collaboration, judged by how active students were in sending messages to the group, how active they were in responding to postings from their peers and to who were most of the postings directed. The third research question sought to ascertain tutors’ views on how collaborative learning had contributed to their tutees’ understanding of content knowledge. The findings are reported in Tables 1 through 3.

Findings and Discussions

How Did Tutors View Online Collaborative Learning?

Table 1 reports the findings based on tutors views on online collaborative learning. When the tutors were asked whether they understood the process of collaborative learning, the majority, that is 95.6 % of tutors either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Only 4.4% of the tutors indicated that they did not understand the process. On whether tutors felt that online collaborative learning is an important component of learning at OUM, the majority, that is, 96.6 percent of the group responded positively. Only 2 (2.9%) tutors disagreed. When next asked whether they knew what is expected of them in the online collaborative environment, 24 (35.3%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 42 (61.8%) responded that they knew what is expected of them in the online collaborative environment. Only two (2.9%) respondents indicated they did not know what was expected of them. On the frequency of reading the postings, 77.3% of the tutors reported that they viewed the postings three or more times per week. And, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that there was a variety of postings. Out of a total of 67 tutors who responded to the statement, “I enjoy posting messages in the discussion board,” a total of 58 tutors (86.6 percent) responded positively and 9 (13.4 %) responded negatively to the statement.

The findings generally indicate that the OUM tutors were positive towards the value of online collaborative learning. They believed that online collaborative learning was important. About 77% of the tutors viewed the online postings more than three times a week. The majority (86.6%) of tutors perceived that online collaborative learning contributed to the quality of learning. These findings could be largely due to the fact that the OUM has a very rigorous and committed culture of training the tutors before they begin the online tutoring process. OUM tutors are introduced to an array of e-learning concepts and aspects of online tutoring which includes the process and benefits of online facilitation as well as the roles of online tutors. Apart from that they have a hands-on session on the OUM learning management system, particularly on how to use it. In addition, every tutor is provided with a specially prepared guide on effective online tutoring. It is thereby recommended that the present system of training tutors be maintained but at the same time more features added to reinforce the techniques of how to be effective in online collaborative learning.

In view of the fact that online collaborative learning is relatively new, with few of the OUM tutors having experienced it, one suggestion is to establish an ongoing online discussion group on how to develop an effective online collaborative learning environment as part of continuous training. Topics could include aspects of online tutoring, roles of online facilitators and skills on effective tutoring with the aim of building a learning community. A few model online tutors could be elected to facilitate the discussions among new OUM tutors. The model facilitators could provide pointers, motivate active participation by encouraging passive participants to post their viewpoints, point to useful resources and in the process, help develop effective online tutoring skills. The weaving and summarizing of the discussions should also be included to demonstrate how this is achieved. These are precisely the skills online tutors themselves need to be doing with the learners. The model facilitators could serve as a support group for new tutors as they develop or refine their skills.
Table 1: Tutors’ Views on Online Collaborative Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Agree N (%)</th>
<th>Agree N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I understand the process of collaborative learning (N=68)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (4.4)</td>
<td>41 (60.3)</td>
<td>24 (35.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Online collaborative learning is an important component of learning at OUM (N=68)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (2.9)</td>
<td>37 (54)</td>
<td>29 (42.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I know what is expected of me in the online collaborative learning environment (N=68)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>2 (2.9)</td>
<td>42 (61.8)</td>
<td>24 (35.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I enjoy posting messages in the discussion board (N=67)</td>
<td>1 (1.5)</td>
<td>8 (11.9)</td>
<td>39 (58.2)</td>
<td>19 (28.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I read the postings three or more times per week (N=63)</td>
<td>1 (1.6)</td>
<td>11 (17.5)</td>
<td>32 (48.5)</td>
<td>19 (28.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. There is a variety of postings (N=65)</td>
<td>3 (4.6)</td>
<td>10 (15.4)</td>
<td>36 (55.4)</td>
<td>16 (24.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Tutors’ Views on Patterns of Online Collaboration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Agree N (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I noticed that most students are active in sending postings to the group (N=65)</td>
<td>10 (15.4)</td>
<td>35 (53.8)</td>
<td>17 (26.2)</td>
<td>3 (4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I noticed that all students are active in replying to postings from their peers (N=67)</td>
<td>11 (16.4)</td>
<td>30 (44.8)</td>
<td>22 (32.8)</td>
<td>4 (6.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Most postings are directed to the tutor (N=62)</td>
<td>1 (1.6)</td>
<td>19 (30.6)</td>
<td>35 (56.5)</td>
<td>7 (11.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What was the Pattern of Online Collaboration?

Generally, learners depended on the online tutor (see Table 2). This can be deduced from the frequency of postings to the group and to the tutor as well as postings in response to their peers. The majority, that is, 69.2% of the tutors found that learners were not posting messages to the group. And, 61.2% of the tutors indicated that the learners were not active in replying to postings from their peers. Instead, most postings from the learners were directed to the tutor. This was reported by 67.8% of the tutors who returned the questionnaire.

The OUM learners are still largely dependent on the tutor in the online collaborative learning environment. The instructor is very much the “sage on the stage.” With effective facilitation of the discussions among learners by their tutors, this “sage on the stage” belief can be eventually replaced with respect for their peers as their “learning consultants.” It is believed that this is a process of enculturation requiring a period of time and patience. With effective training, it is also expected that the new learning culture will emerge and evolve within the near future. This can be determined by the OUM and perhaps reflected in policies that will encourage effective online learning. In addition, it appears that the OUM learners are still very dependent on the tutor for online support. As life-long learning skills are important for employee survival in any organization, it might be timely that learners are made aware that depending too much on one expert may not augur too well in terms of total personal development. Also, this could have happen because tutors may not be willing to let go of their authority. As aptly stated by Cox et al, the tutor should be enlightened on the fact that he is a co-learner in this process and not someone in control and power. As such during the training session emphasis should be given to these areas and case studies should be discussed in detail. Strategies of weaning learners off the tutor will definitely need to be incorporated in future training programs as well.

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Did Online Collaborative Learning Contribute to Increased Content Knowledge?

On the whole a majority of the tutors felt that online collaborative learning contributed to improved content knowledge. Table 3 shows that a total of 80.8% of the tutors felt that online collaborative learning had improved content knowledge. A majority, that is, 91.1% tutors said learners had thought and reflected on the questions posed in the discussion board before replying to the postings. Most of the tutors (72.7%) also perceived that they have moderated the online discussions well by focusing on a particular issue. On the whole, 67.2% of the tutors believed that the online discussions were interactive. However, only 52.3% of the tutors found that learners contributed to each other’s understanding. Tutors verbally reported that learners tended to pose questions to tutors rather than interact among themselves.

It is necessary to determine whether discussions were more directed towards particular issues and well reflected upon before the answers were posted. A more in-depth study should be carried out. This should include an analysis of the postings made by tutors and learners. To determine also if the quality of online interactions have actually contributed to improvement in learner content knowledge, it is recommended that the study be extended to learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Disagree N (%)</th>
<th>Agree N (%)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Content knowledge improved through online collaborative learning (N=63)</td>
<td>2 (3.2)</td>
<td>10 (16.0)</td>
<td>44 (69.8)</td>
<td>7 (11.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I think and reflect on the questions posed in the discussion board before offering a reply (N=67)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>6 (9.0)</td>
<td>41 (61.2)</td>
<td>20 (29.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Online discussions are well moderated and are focused towards a particular issue (N=66)</td>
<td>3 (4.6)</td>
<td>15 (22.7)</td>
<td>42 (63.6)</td>
<td>6 (9.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The online discussions are interactive (N=64)</td>
<td>2 (3.1)</td>
<td>19 (29.7)</td>
<td>33 (51.6)</td>
<td>10 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Students contribute to each other’s understanding tremendously (N=67)</td>
<td>4 (6.0%)</td>
<td>28 (41.8)</td>
<td>30 (44.8)</td>
<td>5 (7.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Tutors’ Views on whether Online Collaborative Learning Contributed to Increased Content Knowledge

Conclusion

Creating an effective collaborative learning environment is more an art than a science. It depends not only on the tutor but learners as well. The concept, rationale and the ways of achieving this has to be clear right from the start and perhaps best ensured by continuing with how OUM has been training its online tutors as well as include some the suggestions given. The benefits of online collaborative learning imply that tutors must be effectively trained. The study has found that tutors are receptive towards online collaborative learning. This positive attitude will enable OUM to further impart the necessary knowledge and skills. Additional studies need to be carried out in the near future to ensure that online collaborative learning has, indeed, helped learners achieve the learning objectives.

References


