

The Essential Role of Tutors in Supporting Distance Education Students, the Case of Payame Noor University of Iran (PNU)

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Abstract

There are fewer opportunities for E-learners and distance education students to visit their instructors and their tutors in face to face classes than in conventional universities. Since the tutors have great roles in spreading education in distance education, it is very necessary to train and educate them appropriately. Unfortunately, over the recent years, because of high increases in the numbers of PNU students (about 1000, 000 last year!), it has highly become difficult to run tutorial sessions for all students in Iran, PNU University, due to various educational, social and financial constraints. This paper seeks to identify the methods that can be more helpful to support E-learning and distance education students educationally, particularly, in remote areas of Iran.

Key Words: Distance Education, Tutors, PNU, Students, constraints

INTRODUCTION

Payame Noor University (PNU), the only distance education university in Iran, is known as the biggest university in Middle East and a mega university of the world. It concludes of 15 Regions (Provincial study sections), 300 study Centers and Units which more than 1000,000 students are studying at. However, to most of educated people this increase in student volume compromised quality assurance, which was followed by a high failure rate that made the institution less

attractive to prospective students in overall entrance examination of universities. Consequently this university has confronted some problems and limitations in offering its study courses. It is clear that we can not have so many learners with inappropriate educational and technological supports and lack of experienced tutors.

But, regarding the great number of potential university students and the sense of responsibility of the new government for the continuing education of the Iranian youth, PNU provides a firm ground for the development of higher education throughout the country. This necessitates the special attention of the Government as well as the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to the pivotal role of PNU in the materialization of the national goals of higher education, its major role in the training of the necessary manpower foreseen in the country's development plans, particularly in the deprived and underdeveloped regions.

Tutors in Distance education and E-learning methodologies have always been the poor relations of course authors. This is a result of the implicit hierarchy in distance education method of offering the courses to the far away students. Consequently it has been tending this university demands and admires writing materials and benefiting of new multi-media over face to face teaching strategy. Therefore, the lecturers' and tutors' roles are little understood both by university managers and the authorities of ministry of

higher education as well as the authors of PNU textbooks. However, concerning the multidimensional changes in the current and future affairs of the university, the new management proposes some changes to the form and content of PNU in future years which will make the tutors' and lecturers' roles much more important than before.

It should be mentioned that the PNU students are studying at Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degree levels majoring in different fields of in Humanity, Natural and Basic sciences Engineering, Arts and Agriculture using semi-residential mode of education in Iran and some nearby countries.

The state of educational technology in PNU

Information technology (IT), essentially consist of amalgamation of technology related to electronic components, computers, and communications, is going to have far reaching implications on the country's overall developments. Modern information is increasingly considered to be an important resource, now more people are concerned with the production, distribution & processing of information in the transition to the "Information society". Technological enhancement in information handling have resulted in the development of new research tools both hardware & software. These informational tools can be viewed as a mixed blessing. The awareness of the need for modern information is growing as well as widening its concept from Society & technology to the general people. It is observed that the educational and information environment are beginning to emerge in all the universities, particularly distance education and E-learning institutes.

New technologies are opening up a range of new opportunities and challenges for educators. One of the most important is the

ability to deliver tertiary education courses via a variety of online platforms. In many ways, these technologies are liberating the education sector. Previous boundaries of time, location and distance are gradually being overcome. But online delivery of courses is only one benefit of the online revolution: another is the vast array of new tools and techniques that it provides for educators to use in their everyday activities. The challenge is both to adjust to online delivery and to incorporate new technologies into the more "traditional" modes of study. Students in today's world approach the task of learning in a different way- they expect the university courses they study to do the same. Educators and tertiary institutions must embrace this brave new world of teaching or to be left behind.

Recently, the PNU university of Iran, as a mega distance education, has taken up these challenges by developing virtual teaching through some TV educational programs broadcasting weekly on the scheduled times and CD available in study centers' libraries. However, this university is going to develop a Web-based, self paced interactive learning resource for students in next years. Approximately two-thirds of Iranian students study through distance education study centers all over the country. It is also vital that the referencing support should be based on accessible technologies, user-friendly, and appealing to the diverse student population. Differences in age, gender, and learning style preferences were also considered.

In addition students may use either print resources or Internet reference material to check points on referencing style, according to their preference. One of the links provided is to the Central or Regional Library resources including general guidelines for the main academic conventions. Ottewill and Hudson (1997) emphasize the need for

greater collaboration between teaching staff and information specialists to help meet the information-gathering needs of students. In PNU future strategy, they are going to complement existing resources rather than to replace them, acknowledging the need for an integrated approach which allows students maximum choice plus support when required.

Recommendations for improving interactivity

Web and Internet activities need to be carefully planned. Problems need to be identified and remedies sought. Students need plenty of advance warning and adequate induction. Learning objectives should be identified as a first step. These should be based on both content (e.g. planning theory) and process (e.g. group learning, group tutorial sessions, peer mentoring) and be congruent with the learning objectives for the unit as a whole. Forms of interaction should be defined to achieve the unit's aims (Laurillard, 1993)

Distance education in the past and present

If we go back to the 1990s, the distance education community debated the some theories related to distance education; this was a discussion that rooted in Peters work (Peters-1983) which had characterized distance education as an industrialized process of education with a clearly defined division of labor. On the whole colleagues writing in this field saw industrialization as a bad thing- leading to an increase in administrative and management control.

It was also hypothesized that in addition to developing confidence in their referencing skills, by engaging in the online referencing activities students would also be developing their technology skills. That is, they would be practicing site navigation, downloading

software, basic word processing, and emailing, electronic feedback and internet searches at various stages of their academic activities. All of these are considered useful in the current education context, as well as for their future professional development.

Online education is now being aggressively marked on a global basis in an attempt to capture all the world economy in near future. As the aim is to encourage students to move to mediated learning, without losing their ability to achieve situated learning, then participation in computer-based discussion groups and learning partners can provide useful tools.

Universities offering distance education programs and increasingly all universities offering programs in flexible delivery mode (whatever that may mean) have a responsibility to recognize the needs of these learners and provide appropriate support services in accessible ways. Avoid the open door of access to higher education becoming a revolving door universities need to affirm their commitment to student welfare as part of their central concern. Shift the focus away from identifying students with difficulties who need help to optimizing the experience of all students.

Regardless of the institutional philosophy of academic support, distance education students should be provided with some form of accessible, relevant academic support targeted all the needs of students studying via distance education.

Many mega universities in E-Learning and distance education universities such as PNU, Indira Gandhi National Open University and China radio & Television universities and so on have resorted to televised instructional systems as some of the best forms of learner support. Learner support has recently been highly technological and relatively expensive with use of the Internet facilities, also

difficult to administer in some third world countries and specifically in the deep rural and remote areas where basic resources like electricity, accommodation, transportation and communication are not available easily

The Characteristics of successful Tutors

A good tutor is essential to aid success, understanding and stimulating his students to study more deeply. But what makes a good tutor? The samples are relatively small, several students and some tutors commend on difficulties in completing the questionnaires because, as one student said, "It is very difficult to number these qualities as they are all important! However, the results are indicative and particularly interesting where there is a substantial difference between tutors' and students' perceptions. It is highly questionable assumption whether the role of tutor is being "deskilled", although it is true that there has been little sustained attention given to tutoring by Distance education and E-learning theorists. Tait has recently pointed out that there is a substantial literature on methodologies relating to the production of course materials and resources in open and distance learning, relatively little has been written about the planning and management of student support.(Tait-2000)

Generally speaking, a well learned and experienced tutor should possess the following characteristics:

- Ensure the students to gain a thorough grounding on their course of study
- Provide the students with academic support in the related course of study
- Help students to integrate practical work experience with academic knowledge
- Support and monitor their students' studies
- Work closely with their lead tutors and fellow tutors
- Run seminars and lecturers at study centers
- Report their academic information provided in international conferences for both their fellow tutors and students
- Write an end-of-module report on each student in their group
- Participate fully in staff development and course evaluation
- Assessment of students' process of learning on due time
- Providing the educational Tapes and CD related the text materials
- Be friendly and approachable
- Mark assignments promptly
- Be easy to get hold of by Tel. , Email or letter
- Know his or her subject of study well
- Help learner to develop skills educationally
- Run very good face-to face tutorials sessions
- Give high quality feedback on assignments
- Understand the students' concerns and try feeling him /her well
- Guide and counsel learners even in their private affairs
- Provide human contact between the learner
- Plan and facilitate tutorials and individual tutorial sessions with learners
- Assist learners to develop time-management and study skills
- Motivate and inspire learners to continue their studies
- Help Individual learners to connect the leaning to their own experiences
- Provide timely and helpful feedback on assignments
- Develop the employability and non subject skills for the learners

- Interact with learners to ensure their retention as subject and motivate them achieve success.
- Provide a private box and notice board on the campus to inform his learners of any changes and to contact them in necessary times
- Facilitate the learning process of learners by offering a direct, personal and subject-related service
- Poor communication among the students and their lecturers
- Inability of students to link with their tutors
- Lack of authority among tutor managers regarding the appointment of tutors
- Poor perception of tutors associated with inadequate usage in their teachings
- Poor selections of learned and energetic tutors
- Some of the tutors are in lack of study material, memos and exam guidelines
- There are a few Telephone contacts with learners' assessments
- There is not clear and easy phoning system for students to contact their tutors
- Lack of information associated poor students' attendance at contact sessions
- Lack of tutor training workshop sessions
- Lack of orientation of tutors to their work

Educational problems in PNU

It is clear that educational technology and teaching strategy in PNU should be implemented in a way that can be helpful to develop science and humanity courses rather than a mean for commercial or propaganda purposes. PNU should try to remove the educational shortages and provide opportunities for those who have various limitations in learning. They should be used in a way to meet the society shortages in industry, agriculture and to improve the overall culture.

Recently, PNU is trying to complement some educational media such as online Internet support, T.V programs, Cassettes tapes, Video CDs, and other multi-media systems into its educational methods, although these media are accessible by some learners and mainly from big towns and cities, but most of the students in remote areas do not access them easily. On the other hand , there are some students who are un-prepared for both E-learning and distance education and they need serious supports by experienced tutor to overcome their shortages and the tutors should be geared up to assist them in their own places. As a whole the main educational problems in PNU are as follow in brief:

- Difficulty to access educational knowledge via TV programs and Internet

Staff development in Distance Education

The emphasis for staff development may need to be more from teaching skills to the development of emphatic skills or the ability to understand and respond to students' feelings of hesitancy, uncertainty and inadequacy. If students' expectations are to be met there will be consequences for how tutorial and support staff is appraised. Again qualities and competencies of approachability and "learning skill development ability" will need to be mentioned. Appropriate methods of doing that monitoring will need to be developed.

Clearly such methods may be tendentious: one person's approachability may be another person's effusiveness". And some modes of communications such as telephone will be

very hard to monitor. On the other hand some modes may be easier: in courses which use computer conferencing for example the tutor's approachability might be assessed from their e-mail exchanges with students. But that relies on exploring methods for expressing warmth and support through e-mail and conferencing?

If we take students' expectations into account then that may offer a method of assessing priorities within the areas of student support. If as well as asking students what factors they find most important they are asked how satisfied they are with that factor then it is possible to draw up a grid. Then items that are rated both highly as important and highly satisfactory by students may well be appropriately supported and resourced by the institution: items that are important but unsatisfactory may need more support and resource, which may just be derived from the satisfactory but less important area.

National goals and priorities have meant that higher education institutes must transform themselves. As a traditionally face to face institution transforms its identity, some attention should be given to how the identities of new learners are influenced and challenged. Better and more comprehensive learner support could help with this project by aiding learners in developing a true sense of belonging to the institution and in better preparing them for their educational Endeavour. To neglect this could easily lay the institution open to criticism of "trading in an industrialized form of teaching and learning" and, more seriously of presenting these learners with a remodeled form of marginalization.

All learning should start with learning needs of the students. That is within each module the student would individually define what their learning problems were and what they wanted to be able to do or know by the end

of the module of study. This would be established through extensive discussions with their tutor and would lead not only to drawing up a learning contract, but also establish the process of study. The learning experiences would create opportunities for students to relate their learning experiences to the workplace- so the extensive use of case studies and exemplars were developed and tutors were actively encouraged to add to these. Moreover tutors were developed to get to know in some detail the work situation of each of their students.

CONCLUSION

The concept of " Flexibility" has hence been adopted as having the potential to exploit the advantages of cooperative or work-integrated education and training E-learning, distance education, face to face education tuition and technology –enhanced learning in an integrated manner (Moore, 1996). Actually, this flexibility in distance education is greatly due to using modern technology, particularly computer, in distance education and E-learning methodology. Computers have a major impact on how students learn & teachers teach. Unlike earlier educational techniques, most of which are vanishing out, computers are taking hold in the education because they are already transforming society itself.

Thus, educational institutions are also changing their mode of interface. Therefore, to stimulate the learners in benefiting information services, it becomes imperative for the distance education students and E-learners to build-up their own information base for area-specific purposes besides the common syllabus to provide distantly by establishing their linkage with other conventional universities so that consistence in formalizing rules & syllabus , teaching process, evaluation, feed-back process, timely & instant updating can be achieved

and individual learner can also take its own pace with this new process and full advantage of its feasibility.

It is important that students in a distance education and E-learning programs should receive support in the aspects as mentioned before. The question however is whether or not all students benefit by this delivery mode. I am in the opinion that it is not. Some students will benefit only from a continuous contact situation, where others do not need contact with the lecturer and are able to continue with their studies, and do well, completely on their own. It is therefore extremely important to assess whether or not a proposed distance education program viable, cost- effective and satisfactory for both learner and tutor.

Institutions in these environments such as PNU with the help of part time lecturers nearby conventional universities providing their learners' support even in remote rural areas of Iran which have traditionally resorted to print media and televised/ VHS materials. However, lack well experiences lecturer and tutors are among the serious shortages in PNU in some deprived parts of country, where the only support directly accessible to some learners have often been text books. There were no organized tutorials or residential schools thus enabling students to study according to their own requirements. Everything in PNU at distance education should be done through Email and telephone contact and present text books should be regarded as complementary educational aids.

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