

# Editorial

## Learner Support

It has often been repeated that learner support is one of the most critical elements in determining the success of a distance education program. That learners should be “supported” seems so obviously desirable that it is not often that anyone stops to ask what this really means. Quite often, giving support to the learner is seen as one of the many functions of an instructor—and who would deny that learners will appreciate an instructor who communicates a “supportive” style rather than one that is not supportive? But is that all that learner support is?

As I see it, every distance education system comprises a subsystem that designs, produces, and delivers instructional and learning materials; another subsystem consisting of instructors who interact with individual students as they transform those common materials into personal knowledge; and an administrative subsystem that manages these two sets of activities. If the system were flawless and worked perfectly at all times for all students, there would be no need for a fourth subsystem, that is, the learner support system. And it should be noted that a well-constructed and well-managed system does indeed work smoothly for the majority of students and for the majority of time. However, it is because no system works perfectly at all times for everyone that a learner support system is needed. The learner support system is the back-up safety net for the individual student who encounters difficulties that are either unexpected and idiosyncratic and so could not be anticipated by course designers, instructors, and administrators, or—more often—are difficulties that they know will occur but that can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis because they cannot predict to *which* individuals they will occur.

Obviously, when setting up a new distance education system and when designing new courses for delivery in that system, everyone involved attempts to anticipate every potential problem that the learner might experience and to do whatever can be done within the limits of available resources to minimize the probability of its occurring. Thus, for example, the course designers ensure that there is a close alignment between the objectives of each unit of the course and its required assignment and that the dates when assignments have to be turned in and the length of assignments and the criteria by which grades will be awarded are all very clearly stated. Similarly, the administration ensures to the best of its ability that students know what tuition fee is required and the date by which it has to be paid. For the majority of students, what is

found in such informational and instructional materials will cause no difficulty. However, it is statistically probable that among the fairly large numbers of persons using the system, especially—as is usually the case—when these students are part-time adult students, there will be some individuals who will experience problems with even the best designed courses and best administered systems. In total, the number of cases and the range of problems may be small; indeed, if there is a competent evaluation system to ensure continuous quality improvement, the number *must* be small. But as already stated, the focus of the learner support system, unlike the design and administrative systems, is not on the mass of students but on the individual, because for that *particular* individual, a problem is likely to appear unique and to be critical, and failure to deal with it may well lead to that person's withdrawal from the course and perhaps the total learning program. It should be noted that each student will move from instructor to instructor as he or she moves from course to course. The learner support system should maintain a profile of the student's progress and any problems that have occurred and maintain an acquaintance with that student in a longitudinal way.

Having worked in a learner support system for many years as well as studying various learner support systems, I suggest that the learner support problems that are presented are of three types. First are what I might call the student-generated problems—usually arising from the adult lifestyle—that prevent the student from behaving according to the expectations or requirements of the course as it was designed. The most common case is inability to produce an assignment by the due date as a result of illness, employment duties, or family crisis, but I would also include in this type of problem difficulty in meeting financial obligations and academic difficulty arising from mal-placement in a course. Second are problems arising from malfunctions in the administrative system, such as the computer-generated letter that demands tuition that has already been paid or failure of the materials distribution system to deliver a book on time. Third are problems that I will define as emotional, which are difficult to recognize because the student invariably presents the problem as an instrumental one, that is, as one of the two types defined above. The student is not likely to explain, or perhaps even to recognize, his or her insecurity in the student role, defensiveness against the kinds of personal change that usually accompanies the learning, need for reassurance, and need for dependence on authority. These emotions, which are relatively easy to recognize and perhaps ameliorate in a classroom, are the source of great difficulty in sustaining motivation in the isolation of the distant environment.

It is to treat these problems, problems that will not affect everyone—but may strike anyone—that is the mission of a learner support system. The

highest priority should be given to informing every student that an easily contactable learner support specialist is available. The student needs to know that if everything else breaks down (not that it will or should), the student support telephone will be answered! Next, it is vital that the person taking that telephone call is one who is reassuring—and supportive! This person should not be expected to know answers to every possible student question and need but has to be able to “lend a sympathetic ear” and to know to whom to refer the problem for specialist advice. Usually this first-contact person will be able to refer with a note to an administrative department, or perhaps to an instructor, or to a specialist counselor who can make a return call and take over the case.

In a good learner support system there should also be provision—perhaps in the person of contracted specialists—even if only on a part-time, on-call basis for support for certain “at-risk” groups. These are groups for whom identifiable conditions can be expected to cause stress beyond that experienced by the general population. Examples include students with visual, auditory, or other disabilities, inmates of correctional institutions, persons with diagnosed learning disabilities or inadequate study skills, and members of the armed forces. Other specialists might also provide advice regarding career development, particularly as it is related to the selection of courses within the educational program.

I should add that there is a place for support services that are somewhat more proactive rather than reactive, which is how I have portrayed them—such services as preadmission advising, advising on financial aid and registration, providing library services, helping with credit transfer, and giving technical support.

I realize there will be readers who might argue that these and other learner support functions should be provided by the instructor, but that is not my view. I maintain that the instructor has more than enough to do in attending to the academic progress of each student and the dynamics of the virtual learning community and that the provision of learner support with high quality is a specialty that requires the attention of individuals with special personal characteristics as well as special training. Of course, the learner support specialist will work in close cooperation with instructors as well as other members of the teaching team.

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