

Staff Development for Networked Distance Education

Sue Tickner
Glasgow University

Background and Context

Glasgow University Initiative in Distance Education (GUIDE) was established three years ago, when there were very few distance courses at the University of Glasgow. Of those, all but one were print-based. At the time of writing there are 8 distance courses or programmes running and a further 23 in various stages of planning and development. Most of the latter make use of networked learning. The teaching staff, development team, support staff and/or administrators of these programmes need new sets of skills and knowledge.

As an institution-wide service set up to support distance education and promote its development, a core part of GUIDE's work is in assisting staff who are new to the concepts, processes and methods involved in setting up and running their distance education programmes. We consequently strive to identify the specific knowledge and skills these staff will need when they embark on the design and development of such a course for the first time. This includes the skills required for networked learning. This information then directs our staff development programmes.

This paper sets out some of the strategies we have applied to staff development for networked distance education. It describes the success and limitations of each approach, examines some possible reasons, and grounds this in the wider context of our philosophy and practice and our understanding of the terms 'networked' and 'networked distance education'. Particular training needs which emerge from our work suggest five broad categories are most commonly needed; these will be examined with examples from our work.

Definitions

The scope of 'Networked Learning' will undoubtedly be discussed elsewhere at this conference; here online distance education requires expansion. Few courses with which we work are delivered exclusively online. Most include some element of face to face meeting, and many make use of multi-media modes of delivery, including print. Increasingly, however the developments are based around a set of resources, activities and communications online. Our understanding of an 'online course' is one where the primary means of communication or delivery is over the networks. This does not necessarily imply, or limit such courses to any of the conditions sometimes associated with networked learning, such as that the content and syllabus are socially constructed, dynamic and unique, and less pre-planned or structured than is usual with other kinds of learning.

Defining 'distance education' is less straightforward, and quickly became an early priority, both for GUIDE and for the staff who sought our help. For resourcing reasons it was important to clarify what we did *not* consider to be distance education, and to whom the staff proposing those projects should go for help. This was also important for political reasons. We enjoy mutually beneficial relationships with other services and could not function effectively without their help and goodwill. The University has a Teaching and Learning Service intended to assist

in all aspects of student and staff development and this clearly includes support for innovative, flexible or technology-assisted learning. Part-time developments come under another section, and various services and projects at the University help with different aspects of production and technical development. We neither had the resources nor desire to take on projects falling under others' remits.

We settled on a working definition of distance education as that where 'the bulk of the learning and teaching occurs off-campus'. The extent to which this applies to learners on many traditional undergraduate degree courses is certainly debatable, since most spend a large proportion of their time engaged in self-study. However, this does limit the possibilities with which the inevitable blurring of face-to-face and distance learning & teaching now confronts us. Undoubtedly, the boundaries will blend increasingly as networked learning becomes more prevalent in more 'traditional' courses and for younger learners. Nevertheless, this definition has implications for staff training in networked distance learning, as will be discussed in the final section.

Staff Support - working methods

From the outset we have viewed the close, tailored support we offer from a thorough and personal appreciation of the distinctive features of each development, as central to our philosophy. Each course, programme or project is generally 'taken on' by one of the GUIDE team, matched as far as possible to the needs of the project and the specialist expertise each of us contributes. From that point the staff involved in development are guided through the appropriate stages, prompted, supported and represented when necessary by this close personal contact from one individual, backed by the support of the team - until another's expertise is enlisted.

This is clearly, a resource-intensive approach, but has advantages which are not, in our experience, present in a fixed programme. 'Learning by doing' real world tasks (Seely Brown, 1983) fosters an engagement which does not necessarily occur when learners must fulfil external course requirements (Jones and Cawood, 1998).

Staff Development Activities

Initially we offered a programme of workshops on specific dates at regular intervals, in line with other staff development provision at the University. We devised a series of introductory sessions and incorporated these into the credit-bearing structure then operating for probationary staff. Although apparently of value to those who attended, these met with limited success in terms of providing adequate and timely staff development, whilst releasing our resources for more specific support. Despite the encouraging numbers expressing interest in our courses, the timetabled staff development activities were attended either by a disappointingly small number of staff curious about our existence, some of whom simply needed credits, or by a core group of those with whom we already worked in close cooperation. In reality, many of the latter had little need for 'generic' introductory courses, or were struggling hard to develop different aspects of their programmes at the times our courses became available. Since most of the workshops required attendance at two or more consecutive sessions split over some weeks, most lecturers achieved only a proportion of the training we had designed.

Networked Learning Materials and Support

We have attempted, like others, to create a set of guides and resources to which academics can be pointed for information. Whilst some of these are being used, and at least provide a starting set of references, we have not succeeded in refining these to our satisfaction. Neither do we feel this would provide a comparable or sufficiently comprehensive alternative to one-to-one support through all the stages from conception to delivery. Course teams have limited time and their needs are highly focussed on their specific developments.

In retrospect it seems clear that our own working methods were partly the cause: personal attention to the particular needs of each project is highly valued and initially, each individual or course team requesting our help appeared at a different stage in their development plans. Staff from some courses already running through print-based delivery requested initial awareness raising regarding types of technology and their application. Others might be looking for assistance with anything from proof-reading materials, to finding online assessment software, to writing a funding bid - or simply in deciding whether or not to embark on developing a new course for distance delivery at all. At first there were few projects and a lack of a critical mass.

However, the number of developments increased rapidly. Through a mix of face-to-face support and technology we were essentially providing 'just in time learning' within a growing 'community of practice' (Goodyear & Steeples, 1998), albeit informally and largely by email.

TALiSMAN¹'s Training Needs Analysis (Tomes and Higgison, 1998) reported that staff used networks frequently (over 80%) to collaborate with colleagues and gather information, and that 80% of staff identified a need for training in networked technologies. Wider use of networked learning, (which became more feasible once the University began supporting conference software), would meet these requirements.

Individual Support within a Networked Community of Practice

In order to address these issues we began a different strategy in 1999, whereby selected sessions are offered to those members of staff on our database at times where maximum benefit might be gained from both GUIDE resources and the academics who need them. We attempt to suit the provision to groups of course teams requiring the training at the times where it will be most beneficial to their planning, development work or delivery. Many elements of these sessions are carried out through networked learning.

At the same time, we have begun to invite groups to specific ongoing and 'one-off' online activities which draw together disparate groups known to be interested in similar issues, and resources for self-study are being developed and constantly reviewed. Our close partnership with development teams allows us to both tailor provision and identify generic issues, which inform the projects in a cumulative, iterative development process, conducted largely in itself through networked learning methods.

The customised approach mixed with targeted networked training does seem to work best, and we see this as a major plus in our philosophy and working methods. Furthermore, it better suits the working methods of those we are aiming to support. Together with the course teams, we work on their own real projects, resulting in the pooled skills of a mixed team. Unlike mandatory training sessions, our networked activities are not viewed as an external intervention but as a local, closed forum for the issues staff are experiencing, rooted in real local examples, restricted to small groups with similar training needs to provide the 'safe environment' in which sharing can occur.

Broad Categories of Training Needs

These various strategies chart our own developing understanding. We have gained experience as our networked body has grown, and succeeded in sufficiently rigorous record-keeping to be approaching a better understanding of the most common categories of training requirements in each development. By focusing on staff needs rather than a comprehensive curriculum, their immediate needs fall into new groupings.

This suggests that there are five broad areas of training requirement common to all staff:

1. course design (including an understanding of how and where networked distance learning might differ from face to face)
2. project planning (development timescales, scheduling discussions and tutor contributions)
3. support systems, including feedback and assessment procedures, communication and interaction online
4. Materials design, with an emphasis on clarity.
5. An appreciation of the role of the online tutor.

The following section broadly describes the knowledge and skills required for networked distance education under each of these headings.

1. Course Design

Designing a distance course might require identifying administrative mechanisms and processes, designing materials, activities, support systems and assessment procedures. Where distance education differs from the usual process is largely a question of emphasis, demanding attention to a wider set of variables. Where learners have regular, face-to-face contact with the course team, their peers, the University services and all the benefits of a campus-based course, small failings in the system might be relatively easily dealt with on an 'ad hoc' basis. When learners are at a distance pre-planning becomes more important.

Networked learning covers a range of learning and teaching methods, from which the tutor needs to be equipped to select. Designing and managing collaborative work requires skills in fostering a supportive environment, making written expectations unambiguous, a need for regular and meaningful feedback online, efficient mechanisms for student support and interaction and an added need for contingency plans where networked learning is used for distance courses. Without experience of either of these forms of teaching there is no reason to expect the majority of staff to have acquired a depth of understanding and ease of application with new skills.

2. Project planning

This is perhaps the area where GUIDE's help is most frequently called upon, and where our liaison with University services, links with external bodies and increasing involvement in policy and direction-setting can ease the path for a hitherto self-contained departmental team. Planning an online distance education course or programme requires an understanding of administration procedures, business planning and/or sources of funding proposals as well as skills in writing them. A considerable amount of experience is required for realistic estimates of, for example, development time, and unless there is a history of project planning it is unreasonable to imagine that academics will come pre-equipped with sufficiently developed skills in scheduling, accounting for dependencies or contingency planning, let alone knowledge of costing mechanisms.

An understanding of how best to schedule and pace events is crucial, and course teams need to predict the ways in which student cohorts might affect 'critical mass' in discussions.

The availability of local services off-campus needs to be understood, as do any limitations.

3. Support systems

While networked learning often aims to increase the learner's responsibility and control, it is nevertheless incumbent upon those offering the experience to provide support and guidance. This is clearly more so when there is minimal face-to-face contact. There are particular considerations which do not necessarily enter into a campus-based network learning course, including the levels of access that can be supposed from a range of ISPs, hardware and software specifications, costs of time online, especial alertness to difficulties arising from disabilities, and non-traditional learner characteristics which might include lack of practice in learning strategies.

4. Materials (and activities) design

Designing materials and activities for an online distance course requires knowledge about how networked learning materials can be delivered remotely and how they might be used, the scope of potential activities and a base from which to justify selections, and an appreciation of the effects of remote delivery.

All of this needs to be learned and applied in context. It is hardly surprising if some academics, having attended a course in web page creation and lacking awareness of alternatives, envisage networked distance materials as lecture notes on the web.

5. An appreciation of the role of the online tutor.

Networked learning is widely believed to work best with a facilitative role for the tutor and a more 'responsible', active engagement for the learner. However, as Laurillard (1993) points out, students cannot simply be left to get on with it; they need clear guidance and support. No more so than when regular attendance, or chance face-to-face meetings do not occur. Using networked learning in distance courses implies a need for skills in the management of online discussion groups; from technical facility with the system (registering students, uploading documents) to a 'feel for' the time to start a new conference area or split an item. The tutor needs to weigh the effects of, and reasons for, intervention for various ends (task/timescale reminders, refocusing discussion, requests for input or feedback, suggestions) Again, where the

learning occurs primarily off-campus, the tutor's knowledge and skills in creating the environment, responding to events and managing outcomes are of heightened importance. The online distance education tutor will also need good time management skills. A facility with and perceptiveness to primarily written communications is essential.

Overall, using networked learning for distance education demands a broader understanding of factors related to the institution, wider issues such as costing and management mechanisms and an added sensitivity to the effects of distance. This combination is likely to become more prevalent as networked learning reaches out further beyond the confines of the institution.

Meeting these training requirements

A common, though not invariable, sequence of interactions with a member of staff at the start of a distance development might be as follows:

- Face-to-face meeting to establish aims, the starting point, a broad timescale and resources available/requirements, where we can help. Date for next action/meeting
- Items for action - example materials or course outline notes, basic details and meeting report for confirmation/correction. Frequently references and/or further info, sometimes background reading. Usually through email interactions, one-to-one (or small groups)
- The course team is joined to a mailing list and relevant online discussions, linked to a network of others with similar aims/needs
- Since networked distance course teams are still a fairly small community, individuals are frequently also enlisted in working groups, invited into related projects or wider discussions which result in mutual benefits
- Ongoing assistance and advice throughout development (feedback on draft modules, objective overview and a role in monitoring progress, rapid-response email helpline)
- Reviews, quality checks, collaborative research papers/seminars, evaluations

Mayes (2000) reminds us of four fundamental points about learning: that understanding is built incrementally through the performance of tasks, feedback is essential and individual guidance within a social context is needed at each stage. We concentrate our efforts on supporting the learners' real-world tasks, whilst linking them to self-help networks when they are needed, and grouping similar training requirements in targeted workshops. The small group, closed nature of the networked learning addresses the need for local applicability and institutional context, and minimises initial resistance to staff joining a new community.

In this way, we strive to provide timely, relevant ongoing support related to, and throughout the experience of, all the stages of networked distance education from conception to presentation, evaluation and further development. This is set within a local supportive framework and delivered at times to suit the learner, not the staff developers. This degree of collaboration is only possible through networked learning with the ability, for example, to lurk on tutors' early experiments with conferencing, allowing us to prompt and suggest when help is needed.

Goodyear and Steeples present a helpful discussion of the types of skills and knowledge required for teaching with ICT (1999). The notion of 'craft knowledge' (the depth of knowledge resulting from years of practice) is difficult to both classify and teach. The authors state that to better understand this we need knowledge capturing methods that involve observation. We suggest that ongoing support through networked learning allows us to observe the novice, and that our approach might be viewed as an apprenticeship model; 'on the job training' in the craft from close mentors and the collaborative support of networked communities of practice. Networked learning methods allow for real-world practice within a safety-net of guided support, whilst providing a rich base of practical experience on which to build future expertise.

¹ Teaching and Learning in Scottish Metropolitan Area Networks. <http://www.talisman.hw.ac.uk/>

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