Supporting Students on Online Distance Programmes

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our credentials

• experience of the Director of Studies system
  – as a DofS
  – with TLA in support of DofS

• research and practical experience PDP

• programme directors of (early) online learning MSc
  – present and past

• involvement with one of Edinburgh’s first MOOCs
  – but too early to say
early days of ICT in teaching & learning

• ICT literacy distinguished from ‘computer-based learning’
• Directors of Studies identified as key players
  – use of electronic mail
  – online access to the Student Record
• email for everyone; 1993 - 94
  – students encouraged to use email for university communications
  – notably with Directors of Studies
• unprecedented access
  – civilisation conspicuously failed to end
seven principles of good practice in (UG) education

1. Encourages student-faculty contact

2. Encourages cooperation among students

3. Encourages active learning

4. Gives prompt feedback

5. Emphasizes time on task

6. Communicates high expectations

7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

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meetings with students

• scheduled meetings?
  – probably a minimum requirement
  – how does that translate into the online?
  – may cultivate a ‘compliance response’; job done
  – do they happen at the right times?
  – what should they be seeking to achieve?
    • communication of information?
      – and in which directions?
    • cultivation of expectation of accessibility
      – support is not a ‘bolt-on’; it must be systemic in the programme

• how does the Personal Tutor system fit in?
special challenges with the online

- lack of structure as compared with the campus
  - both temporal and geographical / spatial
  - disorientation with respect to academic work
  - in conflict with professional responsibilities
- primarily part-time
  - over a longer period
  - intrusion of significant life events; personal & professional
  - mature adults have problems too
- ‘going silent’
  - what this means
  - how to notice it
  - what one can do
- other signs of difficulty
  - what to look out for
how we have addressed this

• orientation; a “foundational” course
  – blogging, and the blog tutor
    • early experience of formative feedback
• aspirational and open
  – expect people to do really well
  – show people what this would look like
  – support the cultivation of high personal expectations
• collaborative and co-dependent
• awareness of when people are struggling
  – a work in progress
  – becoming more of an issue as numbers increase; “Dunbar’s Number”
• two nominations for “best personal tutor” this year
  – and we only have one official personal tutor
what does the ODL context demand?

• personal tutor situated within a particular context
  – community of practice;
  – constellation of practices

• cultivate a “teaching presence”
  – emphasise and manifest accessibility
  – the potential may be all that is needed
  – “ambient collegiality”
    • the community is looking out for you
    • you are looking out for the community

• cultivation and management of expectations
  – explore and address assumptions
    • nothing is obvious; either for student, or tutor
    • importance of a multi-cultural understanding
  – something to address in “planned” meetings
    • “I’d rather hear about you from you first”
what does the ODL context demand?

• issues of course, and programme, design
  – issues of synchronicity and asynchronicity
  – meaning of “group work” and “collaboration”

• more lovely than lovely
  – probably has to feel a bit over the top
  – “always be sincere; whether you mean it or not”

• social psychology of computer-mediated communication
  – trust is easily and readily given;
  – trust is easily lost;
  – trust is difficult to regain once lost

• the online may make disclosure easier
  – don’t have to come into an office and cry
  – more difficult to offer tissues, and give support
discussion

• Find a group – arrange yourself in groups of 3 or 4

• Discuss – “What, in practice, does supporting online postgraduate students involve?” [~ 10 minutes]

• Record – three points, which could include
  – issues of concern
  – evidence to watch for
  – concrete suggestions for what to do

• Share – return to the larger group to discuss