
Distance learning: short-term gain, long-term commitment – a case study

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Presents a case study illustrating practical management and quality issues which have underpinned the transition of a Master of Education course from a traditional to a distance learning format. The background and development of the course are described, including the rationale for, personal experience and some consequences of, “translating” traditional teaching into text-based materials. A summary is given of criteria currently used to define quality within the course but concerns about maintaining quality whilst also reacting to changing external and internal constraints are highlighted. It is suggested that the short-term gains of participating in the distance learning market are attractive, increasing participation in a course which might not otherwise be sustainable. However, participation in this market should not be regarded as a means of doing more with less. If quality is to be maintained, academic tutorial staff need to make a long-term commitment to reflection on their own practice, and require support in this initiative from the managers of educational institutions.

This paper is based on material presented at a conference entitled *Quality Assurance in Distance Learning*, hosted by the Distance Learning Unit, University of Sheffield, September 1996.

Background

Having recently completed a review of a postgraduate course which began as a traditional taught course but now recruits only distance learning (DL) students, I was interested to read Sue Law's (1997) analysis of why students opt for DL in education management courses – though the course under review was designed for practitioners rather than managers in continuing education. Such practitioners and courses have had to respond rapidly to changing policies and practices over the past decade, including the growth of DL itself. Taking a longitudinal view of this one course as a case study illustrates some of the practical consequences of “reactive development”. It also raises questions about the obligations of those who manage and deliver courses, particularly where these are designed for practitioners who have similar roles in other educational institutions. As Law (1997) argues, DL may seem to offer attractive short-term gains – but student success and course/institutional credibility rest on the resolution of fundamental and longer-term quality issues. This paper suggests that a commitment of staff time in which to undertake reflective practice is one such issue.

The history of the MEd course in Continuing Education which forms the basis of this study has been intimately bound up both with that of the academic department in which it is located, and with the changing image and political fortunes of continuing education *per se*. That it is currently attempting to redefine itself is a consequence both of the present indeterminate state of continuing education in universities and of the desire of many practitioners in this field to bring an end to reactive development and reassert their own professionalism.

Launched in 1979, the course was developed in the context of the political debate which took place during the late 1970s about the concept of “lifelong learning” and how this process might best be facilitated (a wheel which now seems to have turned almost full circle). It also signalled the dual intention of the freshly-named Division of Continuing Education, formerly the Extra-Mural

Department of the University of Sheffield, to expand its work in order to meet an increasing demand for new forms of continuing professional education, and to develop research in the education of adults. The latter was at that time struggling to establish its respectability as a field of academic study. The introduction of the course was clearly politically and academically significant, with financial considerations a poor second.

The course was initially provided through one evening class per week in term-time over a two-year period. Successful completion of the associated course-work led to the award of a postgraduate diploma; a dissertation could be undertaken in year three and submitted with the earlier course-work for consideration for the award of the MEd. Recruitment took place every two years and comprised ten fairly local students, mainly from traditional further/adult education backgrounds. The course was co-ordinated by one full-time member of staff with lecture/tutorial input from four others.

There was little change in this format until 1986 when the course was incorporated within a new Centre for Continuing Vocational Education. Though this was linked through staff interests to the Division of Continuing Education, the Centre was itself a sign of the entrepreneurial 1980s, having been set up as an autonomous self-financing unit. The MEd course was redesigned, retaining its three-year format but with the old “liberal studies” model of evening class provision giving way to a more business-orientated day-release pattern intended to attract full-time students, as well as part-timers from a broader geographical area.

Despite a sharp fee increase to reflect its new self-financing status, the course recruited reasonably well, now on an annual basis, attracting 19 full-time (mainly male) and 23 part-time (mainly female) participants in the three years between 1986-89. This is not the place to speculate on the gender divide between full- and part-time participation, but it should be noted that the majority of students continued to be drawn from further and adult education and were supported by their employers, mainly local education authorities (LEAs). The course was managed by one

full-time staff member working with a closely involved team of six others, two of whom had tutored some of the original evening classes.

Transition to distance learning

Following the Education (No.2) Reform Act (1988) which affected the status and operation of LEAs, and thus the provision of adult education through colleges, schools, and other bases in local communities, it became evident that the traditional “market” from which the MEd recruited might not be sustainable for much longer: potential participants were finding it increasingly difficult to obtain either day-release or/and financial support for their studies. The decision was therefore taken to put the course into a text-based DL format in time for a pilot intake in October 1989.

Two full-time, 11 part-time (day-release) and 13 DL students registered for the 1989/90 academic year. The DL students were drawn from a variety of locations in England and Wales. Collectively, students came from a broader range of educational settings, now including the voluntary sector and health and social services; nearly half were self-funding. Significantly, the course retained the same staff and staffing structure although student numbers were increasing and tutors were engaged in writing DL materials as well as in face-to-face teaching, and in working out a new *modus operandi* appropriate to a markedly different group of students.

This constant pressure to “do more with the same” (and, increasingly, with less) in terms of staff time is a not only a significant pattern within this case study but also in the many educational institutions in which students who are enrolled on the course are working. While this creates a certain empathy between tutors and students, such an environment is not conducive to any form of sustained continuing professional development for either group.

It is almost certainly because of this environment that, within four years of introducing the DL format, the day-release/full-time market for the MEd course had effectively collapsed. With many potential local participants indicating that the only way they could study for a qualification would be with the kind of flexibility provided by DL, the number of applications to attend the “taught” course became too low to sustain a group over two years (though it would have been more than adequate in the less cost-conscious 1970s). Since 1993, admission has been solely to the DL mode of study. Had it not moved into

the DL market the course would not have survived.

Survival has also necessitated other changes. In 1993/4, in response to competition from similar courses, the three-year period required for completion was reduced to two, and modules were individually credit-rated, allowing students to select individual modules to study at their own pace rather than following the usual “through route” as part of a year-group. While the advantages to students are obvious, issues of quality and day-to-day management again revolve around the use of time: individual patterns of study and differing timescales for completion have implications for students and tutors alike, broadly associated with monitoring and motivation, underpinned by money.

On average, 26 students per year have been admitted to the MEd since 1993: with a “tail-back” of students still requesting three (and up to six) years in which to complete, this represents more than 70 students involved in the course at any one time and requires the maintenance of a database to monitor and support their progress.

Students are currently drawn from throughout the UK and Eire, including remote rural locations, and work in an extremely wide variety of educational contexts; the majority are self-funding and have no support (in time or money) from their employers, despite the pressure many clearly feel to obtain a higher qualification in order to meet employers’ expectations in an increasingly competitive working environment. It is thus no longer possible to assume that students have a common core of knowledge, of institutional values, nor even of expectations of the course. Additionally, despite three meetings held in Sheffield each year, some students are able to attend only rarely (and a few not at all).

The kind of networking and personal development normally facilitated through face-to-face meetings cannot, therefore, be taken for granted, and neither can the back-up support of libraries and other sources of information which are available to more traditional students. In addition, the modular format lends itself to a much more “product-orientated” approach. This is somewhat problematic in a course for educators where, unlike that of, say, a history or mathematics course, the process and context of study form part of the content of study, and personal development is a stated aim.

How best to support students in this context is a live issue for tutors, some of whom are themselves still coming to terms with a changed working environment, including the loss of much of the traditional group work

from which they formerly derived a large measure of their own job satisfaction. This loss has been compounded by changes in the management of the course which have paralleled, but are not all the result of, the developments in DL. The key factor here, as I shall indicate in a moment, seems to be related to the management of opportunities for the continuing professional development of course tutors as well as of students.

These issues have been partially addressed through the recent introduction of a continuously assessed module entitled *Becoming a Reflective Practitioner*. Its intention is to recapture some of the “process” elements of study, even where students are following a very individualised and independent modular pattern. Tutors working on the module have established their own reflective group which provides a forum for the discussion of a range of professional issues and thus compensates to some degree for changes, discussed in the next section, in the nature of the course management structure.

Course structures and staff development

The course is currently directed by one full-time staff member with a very loosely involved team of four others (all of whom have other major academic responsibilities), plus four part-time tutors who undertake dissertation supervision. Only the course director, one full-time and one part-time tutor were involved in the original taught course and initial development of the DL materials. There is now a sense of distance, therefore, not only between tutors and students but to some extent between members of the course team: staff have less of a shared history, fewer opportunities to work together or with the same students, and most have no real sense of ownership of the DL materials or of the course in general.

Additionally, from being the “flagship” postgraduate course for its department, the course is now merely one of many and is a relatively “low earner” compared with those which recruit from a financially richer market. The MEd course has undoubtedly been a seedbed for several others which have drawn on its materials, procedures and the expertise of staff who have worked through its various metamorphoses. However, in the new, volatile and cost-conscious educational market, it is hard not to fall into the trap of regarding a course which grew out of a different tradition as an elderly relative who, despite a face-lift and even life-giving injections of new materials, is less exciting to spend time with than

younger and wealthier members of the family! This is clearly an institutional management issue which revolves around the way in which “maintenance” is valued against “innovation”; where staff are encouraged to put their energies; and where their motivation and job satisfaction come from.

In its early days the notion of staff development was built into the course. Each module was co-ordinated by different full-time members of staff. They were responsible for the timetable, assessment and evaluation of “their” module although sessions would be taught by various members of the staff team. The seven team members therefore met all the students for a full day’s teaching several times in the year and would liaise directly with individual students over assignments on topics which they had set. In general, staff also took it in turns to act as year tutor to a student cohort. Staff met formally as a management team at least three times a year to discuss matters relating to the course in general and to the progress of individual students.

A designated course secretary serviced these meetings and otherwise provided traditional, fairly low-key, secretarial back-up to the course. This latter role has changed markedly with the introduction of DL and the consequent need both to maintain a database of student admissions and progress and to provide “front-line” contact for students whose main means of communication is by telephone or letter. Most significantly, the overview of the course and students once collectively held by the management team has now devolved almost exclusively to the course secretary and director, with major implications for tutors’ sense of “ownership” of, and indirectly their commitment to, the course.

The management of the course was originally structured on the premise that any new academic staff could be inducted into it gradually via teaching single sessions, and thence through module co-ordination – probably initially of an option in their own specialism, – to year tutoring. It was also intended that the role of course director should rotate periodically both to provide new “vision” for the course and to allow the outgoing director to adopt a more minor role in the programme in order to develop other interests (see Johnston (1990), for further elaboration of this model of course and staff development).

Interestingly, this structure weathered the transition to the DL format with academic members of staff taking responsibility for “translating” each of their taught sessions into a text-based unit. Modules contained eight units, each of approximately 30 pages,

presented simply in an A4 file. It was the co-ordinator's job to ensure that the module was coherent, to write the introduction and to set assignments – though these continued to be marked by the appropriate specialist staff member.

Staff had no formal training in writing DL materials but agreed that the style would be informal and as close as possible to what they would “deliver” both verbally and in the form of handouts in a one-day taught session. Where they might pause in such a session to pose a question for group discussion or reflection, “boxes” would be introduced in the text where DL students would be encouraged to write in a response, to engage in some other activity, or simply to undertake further reading before continuing with the unit. In this way it was hoped that students would be able to interact, as far as is possible with purely text-based materials, and also obtain the “flavour” of staff members' individual teaching styles and approaches to their subjects.

Though all this appeared to be quite straightforward in theory, the practice was inevitably far more complicated. Although – where it seemed ethically appropriate to do so or/and students' permission could be obtained – examples could be incorporated into the written materials from earlier discussions with “taught” students, the absence of active dialogue with students who would be working from the DL materials meant that tutors had to anticipate and answer questions through their writing.

The process of writing is very different from the process of teaching. In taking my own ideas and techniques from one sphere to the other I began to question assumptions in my teaching that might otherwise have remained hidden or been ignored. I also felt a greater need to justify what I was writing because students would not immediately be able to challenge me as they might in a face-to-face session. In consequence, I not only searched out more references but, sitting alone in front of my computer screen, I began to try to explain and defend my own value base in a way that had rarely been required of me in the seminar room. Like all forms of reflective practice, it was not entirely comfortable – and it was time-consuming.

Nevertheless, because of the “tangibility” of the written word and the need for a unit to be seen to be coherent and complete, I sometimes feel that DL students get a better deal from me in terms of “input” than their “taught” counterparts. I might be tempted to answer a question in a seminar, for example, with the stock, “That's a good question but perhaps we could come back to it later” – only to overlook it or find it overtaken by other

issues as the end of the session approaches. However, I find it almost impossible to let a unit go to print without giving some kind of response to questions that have been broached even tangentially by what I have written. Similarly, in commenting in discussion that on a particular issue “My own view is ...”, the need to justify that view seems much less necessary than when I commit it to paper.

Clearly, not all forms of writing or matters of content require such personal introspection or comment. I have found, though, that the process of translating the contents of my taught sessions into DL materials – and thereby opening them up for scrutiny by colleagues as well as by students – has made me very conscious of the need to fill gaps in my knowledge and understanding that I might otherwise have happily glossed over. Indeed, one very useful consequence of drawing all our materials together in DL format was to make the whole academic course team much more aware than hitherto of individual differences in standpoint and style – and thus of where gaps and overlaps appeared in the tutor input to the MEd programme. The introduction of DL therefore had a “knock-back” effect on the taught course which benefited from new insights and materials.

Conversely, the DL materials continued to be updated to include issues arising from the sharing of ideas in face-to-face sessions. With the demise of the taught course, we are now having to consider carefully how to keep the DL materials “live”. This consideration has been complicated by rapid staff changes over the past two years which have brought an abrupt end to the model of course and staff development which underpinned the programme ten years ago and which furnished all staff with a clear overview of the course content and students' progress. How to, and who besides the course director and administrative secretary should, maintain this overview when all students work at a distance and have minimal or no contact with some members of the course team is the subject of continuing debate.

Since most modules are now co-ordinated by staff who, though specialists in the topic areas, were not involved in writing the original materials, questions of how best to include completely new materials and, especially, how to update and amend those written by colleagues no longer involved in the programme are beginning to raise other questions about continuity, coherence and copyright. Such problems are having to be addressed at a time when all the core staff now contributing to the programme are simultaneously committed to developing

other programmes and increasingly responding to the internally and externally imposed bureaucratic procedures associated with accreditation and quality assurance.

Quality issues

Appendix 1 summarises the general issues so far discussed which have arisen from the somewhat reactive development of the MEd course over 17 years in which priorities in, models of, and funding for, continuing education have been in a constant state of change. All have obvious implications for the maintenance of the programme's quality.

The irony of the present emphasis on "measuring" quality when staff are overstretched and thinking time is at a premium is inescapable. Nevertheless, a departmental checklist of criteria for defining quality teaching has been devised. This is summarised in Appendix 2 which also indicates the extent to which the MEd DL programme meets the criteria.

Reflective learning

The information summarised as Appendix 2 was used in the recent review of the MEd: on such a checklist the course is demonstrably doing well. However, even a cursory glance at Appendices 1 and 2 cannot fail to illustrate the difference in the nature of the points listed though both lists are clearly linked to the quality and nature of the student experience. So, what is going on here?

Borrowing Herzberg's (1966) terms, the teaching quality checklist seems primarily to provide a measure of the course's "hygiene factors": those which ensure that an organisation or process runs smoothly but which become noticeable only when they begin to break down. The issues listed in Appendix 1 seem, by contrast, to be more strongly associated with Herzberg's "motivator factors": those which encourage or hinder people from accomplishing the work in which they are engaged, in this case teaching/learning.

Identifying the hygiene factors which underpin a course of study, and ensuring that they are in place and operational, is rather like oiling its wheels. If "quality" is about "fitness for purpose" and a course's purpose is simply to roll, then a "quality checklist" like that shown in Appendix 2 is invaluable. It is interesting to note, however, that this particular list was initially devised by a small group of managers who had no knowledge of the content or operation of the MEd programme; and also that the checklist is

intended for use in a wide range of courses and programmes at all levels of study from undergraduate certificates to higher degrees. To continue with my earlier analogy, therefore, such a list may help to assure travellers of a smooth journey but it pays scant attention either to where they have come from and where they are hoping to go, or to the context in which their journey takes place.

The expressed purpose of the MEd in Continuing Education is to enable experienced adult educators and trainers to integrate theory with practice: in other words, to explore academic knowledge (the theory which exists "out there") and their own professional experience (the understanding which exists "in here" in their own thought processes), and to articulate the relationship between the two. As I have already indicated, the content of the programme (the written materials, references, tutor input, etc.) is thus inextricably linked to the context in which all participants – students and tutors alike – are operating at any given time.

In consequence, factors such as those listed in Appendix 1 not only influence the working and learning environment of course participants but simultaneously become the subject of their study. The programme cannot therefore fulfil its purpose – i.e. its quality is not measurable – without reference to these factors. Yet it is virtually impossible to prepare an all-purpose, once-and-for-all checklist, like that represented in Appendix 2, since such factors are constantly changing and, in any case, have a variable influence on different individuals.

As I noted earlier, one way in which some tutors on the MEd have been attempting to square this circle over the last three years is through the processes of reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995; Schon, 1983), both on our own account and in facilitating students' reflective practice. I have drawn attention elsewhere to the practicalities of operating as a reflective tutor-group (Hunt *et al.*, 1994) and to the implications of incorporating reflective practice as a major assessed element of a postgraduate course (Hunt, 1997, 1998). There is not the space to comment on these again here but suffice it to say that, though neither activity is easy, each is fascinating and undoubtedly contributes to our personal development as well as to that of the course. Additional DL materials have been written each year to incorporate our own recent thinking on the subject together with feedback and suggestions from students and new references to reflective practice in the academic literature.

Far from providing a checklist to focus the mind on the “wheels” that keep the MEd rolling in an acceptable manner, using the course as a vehicle in which to develop our understanding and skills about reflective practice and its facilitation frequently blows our minds. Engaging in reflection forces us and our students to ask repeatedly “What is going on here?” in our respective educational practices and institutions and in our own learning experiences. The purpose of the MEd course in its students’ lives, and the purpose of our role as tutors on it, is thus open to constant question and revision. Arguably, therefore, the quality of the course is measurable not just in the extent to which “hygiene factors” can be checked and maintained – but in the extent to which we and our students are learning to recognise and deal with factors in our institutions and our minds that motivate and hinder us all as learners and teachers.

This case study suggests that the advent of DL may, indeed, represent a short-term gain in enabling an existing course to survive. However, when such a course subsequently actively encourages its students and staff to address issues which are politically and academically significant in the learning environment of their own institutions, it would seem to be tapping into real “fundamental and longer-term quality issues” (Law, 1997) which go beyond considerations of its own survival, content and delivery into those of the wider institutional and political context. In this context “managers” rather than educational practitioners *per se* have traditionally been the decision makers. Perhaps the crucial decisions now facing them are not only how to create time and incentive for practitioners to work reflectively rather than reactively, but how to act upon professional insights thus obtained.

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Appendix 1 – Issues arising from “reactive development”

- increasing student numbers
- increasing distance from university base of “distant learners” (some in remote locations with poor library/IT support)
- lack of support from most employers (in money or time)
- less homogeneous student group – working in much wider range of educational settings (core of common knowledge/expectations can no longer be assumed)
- pressure on many students to obtain a higher degree because of employment situation (achieve task v. growing through process? exacerbated by modular approach?)
- tutors have less input to, or direct knowledge of, students’ learning or working environments
- tutors also under same pressure as many students to “deliver more with less”; less tightly focused on programme because of pressure to design/develop other programmes; increasing use of part-time tutors
- what is the relationship between students, those who “wrote down” their teaching in another place and time and new tutors who mediate between students and written materials when the original authors have left? what constitutes “quality teaching” in these circumstances, and who judges?
- lack of “quality time” for reflection by students and tutors alike

Appendix 2 – Criteria for defining “quality teaching”

(Showing the extent to which these are met within the MEd DL programme)

- The tutor has the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to enable students to achieve the learning objectives of the course

(All tutors are experienced adult educators who teach on a variety of programmes; who have worked in other settings; and are involved in research, some also in consultancy and development)

- Course details are explicit, clear and comprehensible to applicants and to students. Course objectives and the nature of tasks and assignments are clear

(Booklet outlining the aims, structure, content and nature of the programme, entry requirements and admissions procedures sent to prospective students; invitation to discuss the course with a tutor before formal application. “Student Handbook” gives details on presentation and assessment of assignments, including tutors’ marking guidelines, and minimum requirements for progression between “levels” of the programme. Range of assignments linked to content of each module suggested; negotiation of individual title possible.

Aims/objectives of each module given in writing. Booklet of “Dissertation Guidelines” issued giving full details of supervisor’s and student’s responsibilities and all support mechanisms.)

- Students are involved in active learning and receive appropriate and sensitive feedback on their performance

(All assessment by course-work; written feedback given. Full ten credit module with focus on reflective practice (RP) runs throughout the course; personal tutor provides written feedback on each RP “incident” submitted – usually once per term – and telephone support as required.)

- Assignments and other tasks performed by students are returned promptly

(Procedures/timescales for handing in/return (within 3 weeks) explicit in “Student Handbook”. Course secretary is hub of the operation, handles database to “track” whereabouts of assignments, etc.)

- Students’ views on the course content and on its delivery are solicited in a systematic manner, and used to review the course and tutor performance

(Students complete and return evaluation forms at the end of each unit, module and day school; used by module co-ordinators in updating materials each year. Provision for verbal feedback at day schools via tutors and in session led by student representative who sits on formal management team.)

- Teaching takes place in an appropriate environment and is supported by access to all necessary facilities and resources *(The latter problematic, as noted above; library staff currently investigating ways of supporting DL students better; acquiring teaching space for students who attend only once each term is a perennial problem – “out of sight” can mean very much out of the mind of university staff not directly involved with DL programmes, especially administrative “gatekeepers”.)*

- Students know who to turn to for help, advice, or to register complaints and that issues they raise will be dealt with sympathetically and effectively *(“Student Handbook” lists names/role of all staff involved in programme; all academic and support staff plus student reps meet as management team at least once each term. Named course secretary often first port of call for students – can handle most queries immediately or redirect queries.)*

- Tutors reflect on their practice and performance and engage in development of their skills and knowledge *(Personal tutors who assist students with RP module, plus other interested staff, meet twice a term as a reflective practice group.)*

Source: University of Sheffield, DACE: Self-Assessment Statement, October 1994)