

A Case Study on the Importance of Peer Support for e-Learners

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to examine the importance of peer support among a group of post-graduate students in an online programme. Surveys were administered and interviews conducted with Dominicans from a particular cohort; keeping cultural background and occupation as constants. Results showed that students place great emphasis on the importance of peer support; where more than half of the respondents explicitly stated that their peers are helpful to them regarding educational needs, such as finishing their degree and passing their courses. This case study emphasizes the importance of peer support and encourages administration to implement other methods of facilitating peer support between and among cohorts.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students undoubtedly have competing demands when studying online. Administrators, teachers and facilitators of online learners must ensure they create a teaching-learning environment for educational success. In accordance, finding ways to encourage peer interaction and support is one of the keys to online learning success. Online students develop community, construct understanding, and question and clarify content through discussion with other learners (Shackelford and Maxwell, 2012).

Wright (1991) as quoted by Robinson (1995) defines support as “the requisite student services essential to ensure the successful delivery of learning experiences at a distance”. Some researchers refer to support as an integral aspect of the e-learning process, while others merely mention it as appendage. However, Zawacki-Richter (2004) speaks to the growing importance of support for learners and faculty in online distance education, stating that in contrast to face-to-face teaching, distance education in general puts more responsibility on the learners to manage their own learning; online learning requires more competencies (e.g. media literacy) and skills from learners and these need to be developed; and it is especially important to provide faculty support structures to promote, develop and implement online distance learning and teaching. He goes further to state the importance of offering distance learners

additional forms of support in order to ensure successful online learning experiences (Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

Boud et al., (2002) define peers as “people in a similar situation to each other who do not have a role in that situation as teacher or expert practitioner; they may have considerable experience and expertise or they may have relatively little; they share the status as fellow learners and they are accepted as such. Most importantly, they do not have power over each other by virtue of their position or responsibilities.” Support can take the form of “personal contact between learners and support agents (people acting in a variety of support roles and with a range of titles), individual or group, face-to-face or via other means; peer contact; the activity of giving feedback to individuals on their learning; additional materials such as handbooks, advice notes or guides; study groups and centres, actual or 'virtual' (electronic); access to libraries, laboratories, equipment, and communication networks” (Robinson, 1995).

Learner-learner interactions take place “between one learner and other learners, alone or in group settings, with or without the real-time presence of an instructor” (Moore, 1989 as cited by Su et al., 2005). Many studies show that this type of interaction is a valuable experience and learning resource, while empirical evidence shows that students actually desire learner-learner interactions, regardless of the delivery method (Su et al., 2005).

Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) found that some of the main factors, which contribute to attrition, are level of interaction and support. They found that some students in distance learning programs and courses report feelings of isolation, lack of self-direction and management, and eventual decrease in motivation levels (Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap, 2003). They implemented a scaffolding approach, which included an orientation to the online learning experience/ environment, one-on-one advising, and access to a community of learners.

Tait (2014) cited Street (2010), who stated time, pressure, self-management, family, logistics and support (including technical support) and curriculum relevance, as the major causes of failure to progress in online learning. He then further added inadequate educational preparedness as a factor, and noted that these barriers to success, lying both within and outside the institution's direct control, must be acknowledged to determine how students should be supported (Tait, 2014). Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) stated that there is still no substitute for interaction, and there must be opportunities for students to interact in multiple ways with their peers in an online environment.

This study has chosen to closely examine peer support. At The University of the West Indies, Open Campus (UWIOC), peer support is widely encouraged by teaching and administrative staff. Research supports the development of community in online learning as an important factor for maximizing student satisfaction with the experience (Liu et al., 2007; Ouzts, 2006 and Rovai, 2002, as cited by Shackelford and Maxwell, 2012).

For the Master's' programmes at the UWIOC, students must take a three-week graduate introduction to online learning course, before beginning their programme of study. This course includes twelve compulsory activities which aim to orient students to online learning, teaches skills in navigating the Moodle course management system (CMS) and enhancing the capacity to learn by interacting / engaging with peers. Further, it aims to equip students with skills for self-directed learning, skills for writing academic papers and gives students basic skills for engaging in Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing sessions. Students in each programme are regularly invited to meetings with their Programme and course teams (at least three per semester); where a team consisting of the Programme Manager, Course Delivery Assistant, Online and Distance Learning Instructional Specialist and Learning Support Specialists, hear their concerns and address issues. The Programme

Manager also has an "open door policy" where students can contact them at any point in time, and provides one-on-one advising as necessary.

2 METHODS/ PROCEDURE

The particular cohort chosen for this case study consists of 25 Dominican students studying online for their Master of Science degree. This group was chosen as they have a 100% retention rate (with only two semesters remaining for the programme), and have performed excellently in their programme with 5 out of their 10 courses thus far having had a 100% pass rate (Table 1). All students are employed in the field of Education as principals, vice principals or senior teachers. Due to the success that this group has exhibited, it is felt that further observations and data obtained, could be used as a model to assist in encouraging student support, and ultimately student retention and success. Further, this group was chosen, as all participants reside in the same country. The UWIOC generally has students from 17 countries where students often form relationships with peers via the Moodle course forums, skype, social media or otherwise. Studying this group can reveal if peer support is preferred and/or most effective face-to-face or online. All students either know their peer(s) prior to the start of the programme, or met face-to-face during orientation. They have therefore had the opportunity to interact in person for group work or personal study groups (unlike the typical UWIOC students), greater ease of communication such as telephone calls, and access to meet in person as desired. Students voluntarily engaged in informal interviews via skype (subject to availability) and were asked to complete an anonymous online survey. Data was gathered over a period of 8 weeks in the middle of the semester based on subject availability.

Table 1: Grades obtained by students in five courses done to date.

Course code	A	B+	B	Pass
MGMT6019	15	8	2	25
MGMT6202	22	3	0	25
MGMT6206	22	3	0	25
EDLM6004	25	0	0	25
EDLM6005	25	0	0	25

3 RESULTS

Of the 25 students asked to complete the survey, 22 responded (72.7% or 16 females and 27.3% 6 males). 63.6% of respondents are between the ages of 40-49, while 27.3% are 50-59 years old; and 9.1% are 30-39 years old. Exactly half (50%) of the respondents are married or in a common-law relationship, while 45.5% are single and 4.5% are divorced/ separated. When asked “How many children under the age of 18 live with you at least four days per week?”; 54.5% said none, 31.9% said one child, and 13.6% said two children. The gender ratio is reflective of many programmes at the UWIOC and so this factor was not considered. In addition, because marital status and family compositions seemed evenly divided, this factor was also not taken into consideration.

When asked if they receive help with coursework, 76.2% stated they receive help from peers in their programme. Other responses were; staff in the programme; friends; family; and coworkers. 59.1% of students surveyed, stated that they turn to their peers when faced with difficulties. Other results which support the hypothesis that peer support is an integral asset for students (and their success) in this programme, are reflected in Figure 1 below, where 40.9% of students strongly agree (Scale: 1-5 strongly agree to strongly disagree) that their peers are helpful regarding their educational needs.

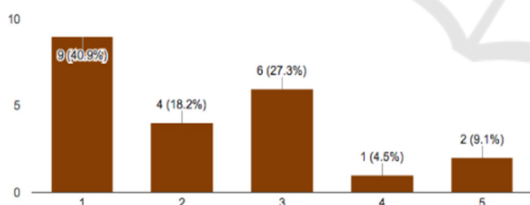


Figure 1: My peers are helpful to me regarding my educational needs, such as finishing my degree and passing my courses.

Students in this cohort seem to generally have a good relationship. When asked if they get along, 54.5% strongly agree, 18.2% agree, 22.7% were undecided/ neutral and 4.5% disagreed. Further, when asked how important is receiving support from their peers on a scale of 1-5 from very important (1) to not important at all (5); 36.4% rated 1, 27.3% rated 2, 22.7% rated 3, 9.1% rated 4, and 4.5% rated 5. This 4.5% represents one student. With over 60% of students expressing the importance of peer support, the results are aligned with literature that

states that the development of community in online learning is an important factor for maximizing student satisfaction with the experience. Very importantly, almost all students agreed that their peers are in good positions to understand what they are going through; with 50% of students strongly agreeing. Once again, only one student disagreed.

Table 2: Qualitative responses from informal interviews.

<p>Students were asked to list ways in which their peers assist them. Responses include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explaining assignments with which I might have difficulty. Encouraging me to hold on. • Reminders when assignments are due • Study groups • We discuss assignments, call each other, look out for each other. For example, if we are missing from Blackboard Collaborate (BbC) sessions, etc. • They explain assignments, we share ideas, encourage one another to work along, call each other to find out what assignments need to be done, or where you are at, study as a group • Take me home after the late night BbC • Clear misconceptions regarding assignments • Offering advice on almost any issue. Meet over lunch to just relax and recharge • Cried with me, explain to me what I couldn't understand, shared information with me, kept me on track, showed me how to do something, shared material with me, fed me
<p>Student responses about peer support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I must say we have a reliable peer group and we work well with each other • A common source of support from my peers is knowing that they are facing the same challenges as I am regarding juggling online studies with work and family life. I have introduced my wife to my peers in order to save my marriage. She has a very good idea of how demanding this programme is on family life. • Liaising with peers is somewhat difficult due to work, studies and family duties. • I always go to my peers for help first, because they've been through the course with me and are more likely to understand my challenges. Then if we still don't understand, a group of us will approach the tutor together.

4 CONCLUSION/ DISCUSSION

Qualitative results obtained from the interviews via skype, also attest to the importance of peer support among members of this cohort (see Table 2 above). Generally, persons rely on their peers for support and assistance with their studies. They definitely listed distinct advantages of having peers in the same country as them and the quality and intensity of peer support received. This was inclusive of many facets

from face-to-face study groups, encouragement and assignment reminders, to transportation. This could be related to findings by Kemp and Grieve's (2014) findings where students had a strong preference for class discussions to be conducted face-to-face, reporting that they felt more engaged, and received more immediate feedback, than in online discussion. They further found that while online and face-to-face activities can lead to similar levels of academic performance; students would rather do written activities online but engage in discussion in person (Kemp and Grieve, 2014). Similarly, students enjoy engaging in face-to-face support due to more engagement and immediate feedback, coupled with the ease of communication.

One person did however state that they find it difficult to liaise with peers, as they have to juggle work, studies and family duties. Brindley (1995) stated that most people can succeed in education, given the opportunity and the support to do so. She however went further to state that some students complete a course no matter what the circumstances (no support, administrative mistakes, long delays), and some students drop out no matter what the circumstances (good support services, well-designed courses, fast turnaround times)...The majority of students fall between these two extremes, and it is for this group that support services may make a difference (Powell et al., 1990 as cited by Brindley, 1995).

The challenge for the UWIOC is to find ways to encourage online peer support and implement more support services. One such means could be to implement an online peer mentoring system within cohorts. Another could be to facilitate a "big brother/big sister system" across cohorts. Further, encouragement could be given to form face-to-face networks in each country, where study groups could be formed, and social events hosted. Greater attention can be given to the initial contact made with students during orientation, to encourage group activities (in and out of the 'classroom'). Although the results from this study are not generalizable due to the small number of students, it sets the stage for future research.

This sample was drawn from one university, so results may not apply to students at other universities. Further, the UWIOC students reside in 17 Caribbean countries. This study only included students from one country, and one profession and so may vary across cultures and/ or professions. It is therefore recommended that future studies include a wider sample of students, across programmes, subject areas, countries and educational institutions.

One could also observe the parallels and value of classroom/ forum interactions and discussions and its effect on learner retention and satisfaction.

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