Colloquia

**How effectively can distance learning students be supported?**

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Jenny is a distance learning student following an online teaching diploma. She is intelligent, resourceful and works well with people and especially with children. She was motivated to further her studies and obtain the necessary qualification for her teacher registration. A few months into her studies, however, she started to struggle. She did not like reading articles and her essays tended to be unstructured and lacked depth. The feedback on her assignments reflected this difficulty, and she started to feel demoralised. Despite the personal support and encouragement provided by her distance learning lecturer, she was seriously thinking about giving up.

This fictional scenario could very well be one of the stories behind the statistics that indicate that a relatively high number of adult distance learning students drop out of their studies when compared to those following face-to-face modes of study (see for instance, Parker, 1999; Carter, 1996 and Martinez, 2003). These high attrition rates have been attributed to, amongst other factors, the inability of distance education providers to provide students with personalised relational and academic support (Buchanan, 2000). Lowe (2005) contends that although the problem of attrition in distance education cannot be resolved by only addressing institutional responsibilities, the solution "certainly ought to be initiated by the institution since many would argue the institution has the higher ethical obligation" (p. 73). Providers who have introduced programmes that support students' relational and academic needs have seen tangible improvements. Campell, Yates and Mcgee (2001) from the University of Waikato report significant success rates following the design and implementation of student support structures for distance learning students. Similarly, providers at Rio Salado College in Tempe, Arizona, have seen a 20% improvement in retention rates a few years after they started their student support system (Lowe, 2005).

A key concern for educators is to qualify the nature of the support offered to distance learning students, especially if one is to go beyond the aim of student retention and focus on helping all students succeed in their studies. Adult distance learning student success has been attributed to a number of factors such as learner motivation (Teja & Levine, 2005), appropriate personal support systems (Jonaitis, 2005, Campell, Yates & Mcgee, 2001 and Lowe, 2005) appropriately designed course content (Lai, 2001), learner proficiency in study skills, and in the case of online learning, proficiency in technological skills (Clarke, 2004).

It should stand to reason that when both internal (motivation, preparedness) and external factors (good course design, appropriate student support) are present, attrition rates in distance learning should not be any higher than in other face-to-face modes of study. Educators however, know that some students find it harder than others to engage in academic pursuits. Despite being motivated and having

access to student support systems, some students still struggle and fall by the wayside (Johnston, 1998; Grandin, 2002).

Research into personalised learning indicates that it is possible to empower all students to learn effectively if their learning styles and patterns are taken into consideration. When students understand their learning patterns they can capitalise on their strengths and use strategies to improve skills where necessary (Prashnig, 1998). Johnston (1998) argues that "hearing and listening to the voice of the learner" is vital to successful learning (p. v). The approach to learning that Johnston has developed is based on the acknowledgement that variations in brain activity between one individual and another result in different patterns of learning. The convergence of the three brain activities (cognition, connation and affectation) form four stable patterns of learning (sequential, precise, technical and confluent), each with a distinct message. Taken together, they compose the learner's combination of "learning voices", to contribute to his or her learning combination (p. 24). Johnston's approach has been applied in educational institutions in the U.S.A. (Newell et. al., 1998; Johnston, 1997), Europe (Calleja, 2006; Testa, 2006) and Australia (Grandin, 2006) with encouraging results.

This approach is based on the notion of shared metacognition, which is the awareness and understanding by both student and teacher of their own learning own skills, performance, preferences, and barriers they could encounter to effective learning. It has been most effectively employed when both students and teachers worked together (Newell et. al., 1998). When students understood their learning pattern combination, they were able to make best use of their stronger patterns, while developing and using strategies to make up for their weaker ones. This was also accompanied by the teachers' knowledge of their students' learning patterns which led to the provision, when possible, of learning and assessment materials that were suitable for different pattern combinations.

Distance education, and nowadays, e-learning can offer students, amongst other benefits, a sense of autonomy, flexibility and shared accountability (Gwekwerere, Hoipkemeier and Trombley, 2005). Providers are recognising the critical importance of academic and relational support in not only retaining, but also assisting students to complete their studies. At the same time they have an excellent opportunity to capitalise on recent research on personalised learning to be able to not only support, but to remove barriers for students who are struggling.

Any such endeavour would imply that distance and online educators need to look at course and assessment design in ways that take different styles of learning into consideration. It could also imply that they need to review the structure and quality of the academic support they offer to ensure that it is designed to encourage students to develop skills and strategies based on the styles of learning.

Sizer (1999), contends that "we cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalised learning requires profound shifts in our thinking about education. …It can be done. It is being done, however against the traditional grain" (p. 11). It is a lot to ask from distance learning educators, however the effort could help empower students like Jenny to understand the

way she learns and to develop and use the strategies she needs to succeed in her studies.

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