THE FIVE COLUMN MODEL OF LEARNER SUPPORT – CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND CHANGE

Karen Beyer & Marion Bruhn-Suhr, Universität Hamburg

Abstract

This paper describes the holistic approach of adult learner's support for blended learning opportunities developed and put into practice by the centre for continuing education and distance learning of Hamburg University (AWW). The concept can be visualised as a five column model based on a support team which serves authors, moderators and students alike. This is complemented by a continuous training and updating concept in order to keep guaranteed quality standards. We report on the results and outcomes following the evaluation of the first pilot-phases.

General framework

The blended learning programmes offered by the AWW are developed within the project OLIM[1] for adult learners with a first university degree and at least one year working experience (Beyer, Bruhn-Suhr, Hamadeh, 2003, pp. 15). As the delivery of education through the world wide web promises many advantages for adult learners, the preparation for teaching and learning in cyberspace was (or is?) neglected to some extend (cf. Goody, 2000, p. 1). The design of our programme takes several crucial areas of online learning into account:

- Not only students, but also instructors/tutors need special training and qualification in order to cope with typical demands and standards of online teaching (cf. Salmon, 2002, pp. 189).
- Individual learning competencies are essential for successful e-learning-processes and academic achievement (cf. Ehlers, 2002, p. 1). This is a well known statement about distance learning or even learning in general. [2]
- If students have not learned to interact in a virtual environment, there is the danger of disorientation, isolation and finally of student´s drop outs (cf. Goody, 2000, p. 3). Students (and teachers as well) have to feel comfortable with the technology!

To cope with these potential risks, we found the following five columns to be essential components for learner support aiming at successful learning process.

The concept of learner support

Column 1: student information system and general administration

There are various definitions of "e-learning" which make it difficult for potential students to judge what they can expect. On the one hand "e-learning" is used as a term for any kind of learning with electronic media, on the other hand it is used in order to differentiate from CBTs or videoconferencing (cf. Reglin, Severing, 2003, p.18). Our e-learning concept relies on substantial proportions of virtual group work. We have to make sure that our students are prepared to commit themselves to contribute to groups, stick to agreed dates and agendas and are not expecting "game-like software". The modules

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[1] OLIM stands for „Online Perspektiven im weiterbildenden Studium" (cf. Beyer, Bruhn-Suhr, Hamadeh, 2003, pp. 15)

[2] Traditionally, competent distance learning providers try to improve their students' learning skills by a set of various offers such as introductory texts or seminars (cf. STEB – Studieren an der FernUniversität or Northedge, 1990, or McLoughlin, 2002, pp.1). A student seems to have a good chance to be a successful distance learner or e-learner, if he or she is highly competent in self organised learning.

are of university level (including the need to read theoretical papers and texts). One of the major learning targets is the transfer from theory to practice.

Detailed information about the programme of study is provided online. This includes information about the contents, the learning targets, learning organisation, timetables, credits, assessments, certification, costs and the minimum standard of technical equipment. There are opportunities for online registration and contact details for individual questions etc. The general administration is organised in as much customer-oriented way as possible.

The evaluation of our first pilot runs quite clearly demonstrates that some students had expected less group work and discussion forums. Clarifying our definition of e-learning shortly before the start of the second run led to quite a few cancellations. Consequently very detailed descriptions on the website are crucial if we want to make sure that on the one hand we address the target group we are aiming at and on the other hand potential students know what to expect.

Column 2: teaching, facilitation, and moderation

Today e-learning experts seem to agree, that (good) moderation of e-learning-courses is crucial for success.(cf. Bremer, 2003, pp. 191). Students who enrol in our blended learning programme do not expect classical computer based trainings, but a learning environment where they can work with others, contact tutors whenever needed and are supported in the learning process in general. The student ought to feel part of a learning community. Discussions are moderated and students´ group work is supervised by our especially trained teachers. All of this creates a "classroom feeling" which helps to overcome some of the typical problems of distance learners, such as disorientation or isolation (cf. Schulmeister, 2001, p. 201, Kerres, 2001, pp. 263, Elsener, 2002, pp. 299).

Our first pilot run showed, that the manner of teaching or moderating a course had a huge impact on the learning process, perhaps a bigger impact than the general course design and learning arrangements. During the process of moderating the courses our teachers reconsidered their roles: They reflected on questions such as *How much guidance should I give?* Or *How often, how much should I intervene in groupwork activities?* This corresponds with feedback from our students who were highly satisfied with the amount and quality of teaching, facilitation and moderation they received. Also most of them had felt part of a learning community which was motivating on the long run. However some of them would have done with less guidance, others asked for even more guidance and moderation. The latter was feedback from students who felt, group activities had not been as successful as they had hoped (cf. Bremer, 2003, pp. 191).

Even though most students approved of the e-moderators, to us it seems, teaching, facilitation and moderation can still be improved. On the one hand we still need to adjust the concept even better to the different needs of individual students and student groups. On the other hand students have to be informed even more carefully what to expect from the teacher and what is expected from them in order to meet the learning targets. Moreover there is a certain responsibility on our side to facilitate the individual student's development towards a self-confident learner. In addition we have to find a good balance between the amount of moderation and support provided and financial restrictions (how much are our customers willing to pay for the product?).

Column 3: course choice and general guidance

Based on the long experience as centre for continuing education the AWW staff is well trained for advising and supporting adult students in questions regarding the prerequisites for taking a blended learning module, the course choice and general guidance for blended learning opportunities. All kinds of communication is involved: email, telephone, face-to-face meetings.

The number of telephone calls referring to our first E-learning pilot was quite impressive: Over 50 calls in comparison with about 70 enquirers. Most information asked for was definitely available on the website. No significant decline in the number of phone-calls was observed for the second pilot despite the revised and adapted web-publication. Can this be interpreted as the wish to find out about the human aspects behind the e-learning?

Column 4: the "Study Skills" module for students

In order to prepare students for the special needs of e-learning the AWW has developed a special module, "Study Skills", which is compulsory for any student taking his or her first blended learning module at the AWW. There will always be a run of this module before any of the other modules start.

By touching a wide range of relevant topics we try to make sure that the students know what they let themselves into. Our "toolbox" for successful study starts with an introduction to the learning platform and its use, because students ought to feel familiar with the learning environment before they move on to their other modules. Furthermore the following topics are presented, discussed and/or experienced:

- time management issues,
- web based group work,
- web-related communication skills,
- IT-skills,
- Reading and note-taking
- basic knowledge of learning styles and their influence on efficient learning individually and in groups

These topics are all related to the well known topics "traditional" distance learners have to cope with.

The module starts with a face to face session, runs over three weeks and is moderated at a very low level. This "toolbox" is open to the students while they are moving on with other modules so that they have the opportunity to go back and reflect on issues which they or fellow-students might have dealt with before or which might come up again during their study experience.

More than 92 % of our pilot students stated they reached their personal goals, and moreover they would recommend "Study Skills" to any other student who needs to gain familiarity with e-learning, teamwork online, the learning platform and its tools etc. Some students stated that they had not believed in any benefit because of previous study experience but afterwards they realised how little awareness they had had about possible pitfalls. Apparently, most students could easily cope with technical and/or other e-learning related problems in subsequent modules. This is for instance illustrated by the fact that our experts were hardly contacted for technical advice once the students had completed "Study Skills".

These results underpin the idea of offering "Study Skills" as a compulsory introductory module. However, the devil is in the nuts and bolts which is difficult to detect and/or evaluate: Have the students really learned to cope with all kinds of typical problems related to distance learning? Or less ambitious: Have they become sensitive to certain issues such as time management, virtual group work, or asking support if needed? What level of competence did they start with, and what did they really gain during "Study Skills"? Was there really a growth in competence achieved by working through "Study Skills"? And last but not least, have we met specific needs of individual learners? Or – how can we possibly meet them, if there is a wide range of such needs? For instance, some learners wish more literature, links and texts related to the course topics. Others recommend less "information overflow".

Also, some student´s questions and comments illustrated that important information had not been read at all. So how can that information be arranged and presented in order to reach the student just in time?

Hence on one hand, the "column 4" - the "Study Skills Module" - worked out well for the students. On the other hand there are still many details to be looked at again carefully in order to further improve the "Study Skills" module, details such as the general course structure and learning arrangements, compulsory and optional sections, and the kind of learning tasks. It seems, that once again it is the distance education expert to be consulted, because topics such as "information overflow", "ignorance of study guides" etc. are well known from traditional distance learning.

Column 5: technical support including technical hotline

Before the students start with our blended learning modules they are guided to check and prepare their technical access to the learning platform. Whilst studying there is technical support provided by the computer centre of Hamburg University in all questions regarding the administration of the learning platform as well as general questions of platform access. Within the project the computer centre in co-operation with the AWW jointly developed the competence and the structure for a hotline.

If there are questions regarding the individual modules there is a contact person within the AWW who will help with those questions that cannot be answered by the moderators of the modules or the hotline.

When our very first blended learning course, "Study Skills", started with 34 students, 22 more or less "technical" questions reached the technical support team (hotline and/or contact person within the AWW). During our second pilot run of "Study Skills" with 70 students there were only 20 such questions. We conclude that within the 13 weeks of the two presentations the module as well as the platform had been improved. During both runs quite a few questions dealt with access/log in or with browser configuration; some questions were related to the handling of platform tools. Once the "real" modules started, hardly any technical advice was asked at all; students could concentrate on the content of their courses.

For teachers as well as students it was essential to rely on experts to deal with technical problems. "It was quite comforting to know, there is someone there to help" is a student's statement. However, it became obvious, that students (with any kind of technical problem) preferred to contact the personally known AWW-expert rather than calling the anonymous hotline. This urges us to improve the presentation of the hotline or even to present the experts that "are" the hotline. Another fact became obvious as well: Students can hardly differentiate between technical or other problems related to the module on one hand or related to the platform on the other hand. Therefore from the customer's point of view organisational barriers should be kept as low as possible.
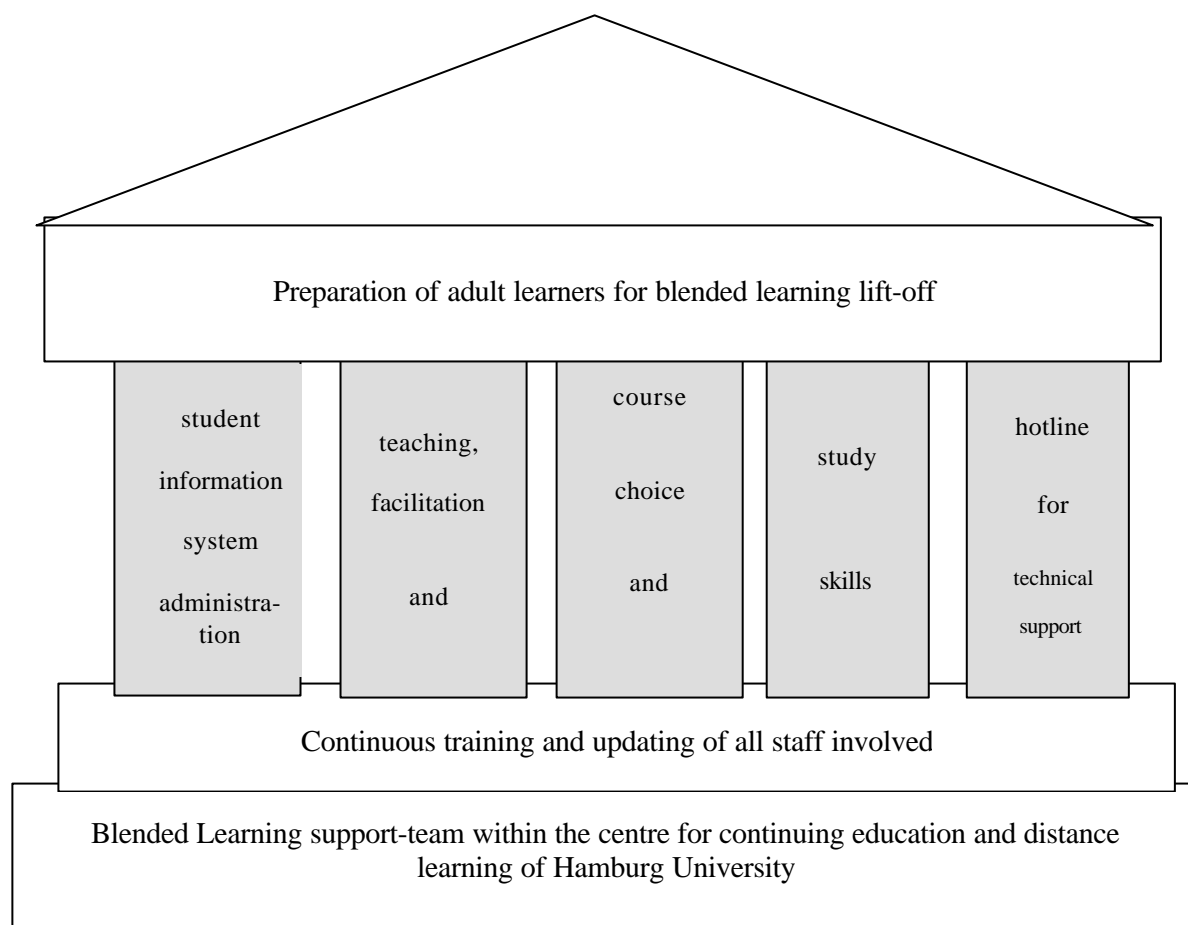

Preparation of adult learners for blended learning lift-off

student information system administra-tion

teaching, facilitation and

course choice and

study skills

hotline for technical support

Continuous training and updating of all staff involved

Blended Learning support-team within the centre for continuing education and distance learning of Hamburg University

Figure 1: The five columns of student's support

Solid base: teamwork and training

The solid base for the five columns consists of two important layers: one consists of a team within the AWW including

- those who manage and co-ordinate the development of blended learning modules,
- those who support the authors (in general professors from Hamburg University and their staff and part-time lecturers) in didactical questions and
- those who provide support in technical issues.

The second layer deals with quality issues, continuous training and updating authors and moderators for the special needs of our blended learning modules and learner's support.

Our authors, moderators and/or facilitators are especially trained for blended learning opportunities. Part of the training is the so called "Train-the-E-Trainer", a module that covers the basics for authoring, designing, moderating and the basics for technical support. This training has severe impact on the development of content and structure of all other modules. Although the special qualification of our moderators is one of our quality standards we took the opportunity to observe the difference between moderators with and without the special qualification within the pilots to ensure that we really have to invest in the qualification of our moderators (cf. Rautenstrauch, 2001, pp. 22 and Salmon, 2000, 2002).

Moreover our modules need to be relevant for the workplace situation of our students. This is accomplished by involving representatives from business who deliver case material and case-studies and provide feedback on the content and design of modules. They work on a secondary contract basis and are involved right from the beginning of the module development (cf. Beyer, Bruhn-Suhr, Hamadeh, 2003, pp. 22).

Following our own quality standards also means that we keep track of international blended learning developments and standards and update our modules correspondingly. The same applies to the contents of existing modules. Continuous evaluation is and always will be a vital part of the quality process in all aspects. This is to ensure the learners get the support they need to create opportunities for growth and change.

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Authors:

Karen Beyer
Dr. Marion Bruhn-Suhr
Universität Hamburg
Arbeitsstelle für wissenschaftliche Weiterbildung
Vogt-Kölln-Str. 30, Haus E
22527 Hamburg
olim@aww.uni-hamburg.de
www.aww.uni-hamburg.de/olim