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INTERACTION AND INDEPENDENCE: STUDENT SUPPORT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION
AND OPEN LEARNING

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Voluntary Academic Assessment to Enhance Independent Learning

ABSTRACT

Athabasca University's Learning Assistance Program provides the opportunity for the adult learner to balance independence and interaction in the pursuit of student success. The adult learner is defined as an independent consumer with certain needs for interaction. The challenge for student support services is to determine what the needs are, develop programs of interaction to meet the needs, and then to advertise and promote such programs so as to reach those students who can benefit from them. Athabasca University's Voluntary Assessment Program enables students to pinpoint their academic strengths and weaknesses with reference to post-secondary level study, and Athabasca University courses. Personalized feedback prescribes materials and programs to upgrade their academic skill levels and to enhance their success as students, but the ultimate responsibility for student success is left with the students.

STUDENTS AS INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

Just a quick look at the adult education literature points out that adults are independent learners (Athabasca University, 1988; Daloz, 1986). Independent learning does not necessarily mean, or even imply, distance learning. Students in any learning environment are learning independently. Indeed, the human brain never ceases to learn (Knox, 1977; Smith, 1989), and is doing so all the time. In many ways students can be thought of as consumers rather than as objects of interventions. Education is definitely not an intervention. It is not something which is done to people. The students make use of, they consume, what the educators make available. Educators in both the content areas and the student support areas are responsible for directing, enhancing, and reinforcing the learning which is going on in their students all the time, but they do not make it happen.

When students start assuming the direction, enhancement, and reinforcement of their own learning then they are taking on the role of the educator as part of their learning process. This assumption of an educator role is one of the characteristics of an active learner. Some students are better at the dual role of learner and educator, at being active learners, than others. The professional educators, in the faculties and in the student support areas, need to encourage and to help students acquire control over their learning, to be conscientious consumers, to be active learners.

STUDENT SUCCESS

While the ultimate goals of educators embrace such lofty concepts as a democratic and healthy society, creativity, evolution of social norms, the advancement of knowledge, and the betterment of mankind (Brookfield, 1986), the real, more immediate goals include imparting information (content) directing learning (priorities, prerequisites), and establishing paths of learning (network of content areas) These more immediate goals can be directly measured by student success. The consequent focus on student success often misleads educators (and those evaluating education) into thinking that because our goals are measured by student success that student success is therefore the educators' responsibility.

The academic faculties are first and foremost interested in imparting information. The faculties owe it to themselves as well as to the students, to their colleagues, and to their content areas to be effective in what they do. Teaching, instructing, or educating, is more than just writing down or reciting information. Telling a story guarantees only that sound impinges on another's ears. But to ensure that the listener not only hears the story, but understands it, remembers it, and uses it, the story teller must stimulate the listener. The faculties are the story tellers. They must stimulate their listeners, the students, by asking questions, by probing, by listening to what the students do with the information, by discussing, by drawing out the students (Brookfield, 1987).

The faculties do not have to be concerned about whether students know why they are taking courses, are in the right courses, have appropriate or adequate academic backgrounds, or need help with study skills. Some forms of student support can be imbedded in the curriculum. Course materials can include suggestions for how to approach the material, or include directions to refresher material, upgrading information, and self-tests to assess readiness for the material. The academic faculty can try to help students directly, either individually or in classroom groups. Such attention to these issues can bring rewards in the form of better students, students who consume more, and students who make teaching more fun. But the faculties' primary concern is to excel at imparting information in ways which stimulate the student. Student success is not their primary responsibility.

Just as student success is not the faculties' responsibility, neither is it the responsibility of student support services. The support areas of education devise, advertise, and present ways to learn more efficiently. They may impart information too, but the emphasis is on helping students direct themselves and select suitable paths of learning. The goal of student support services is the continual development of independent learners into better, more efficient learners. Again, this goal is measured by student success. Ultimately, student success is the students' responsibility. Students must listen, understand, question, analyse, and apply what is being taught. And they must motivate and direct themselves.

INTERACTION

A possible interpretation of our conference title is that interaction and independence are at opposite ends of a continuum and that students can move away from interactive learning toward being more and more independent learners. But is one the opposite of the other? With student support services do students move away from interactive learning situations and become more independent learners? Are face-to-face learning situations interactive while distance learning situations are independent? Do the terms interactive and independent characterise mutually exclusive learning styles? Are these complementary learning styles? Is one better than the other? Not at all; the answer is no to all of these questions (Kidd, 1971; Knowles, 1980; Rogers, 1969).

Then what is the relationship between interaction and independence? Is interaction necessary for learning? when should interaction occur? What form should it take? What are the goals and objectives of interaction? How do we evaluate the benefits to independent learners of interaction?

The interaction in the conference title refers to support services for helping students be successful students. The questions posed are more difficult for distance education to answer than for traditional, face-to-face education because of the limited opportunities for spontaneous interaction between students and the institutions. To begin to answer these questions support services must look at the needs of the students, both their own perceived needs and those which education itself imposes on them (Sork, 1988). Athabasca University has determined that students need information and direction with respect to their levels of academic skill when beginning or returning to formal post-secondary study. Some students perceive this area as one in which they have needs. Others begin to recognize that they need help in this area as a result of advertising and Promotion of programs developed to address this need.

Athabasca University has developed a program to help students assess and improve their academic skills in the areas of writing, reading, and mathematics. The students' use of this support service is the interaction in the conference title. This is the sort of interaction which is reported in the literature as a variable in student success (course completion and student retention) (Brindley, 1987; Pascarella and Terazini, 1979; 1980; Tinto, 1975). The interaction has to happen at the right time, when the students want it, and its content must match the students' needs. If the opportunity to interact is available at the wrong time, or if it is imposed without the students realizing the need, or if the content is not what the students need, they either will not partake of the interaction, or the interaction will not benefit them in any way. They will go away from the interaction thinking THEY have failed, and they might not come back, while, in fact, it was we, and our support, who failed them.

AN EXAMPLE OF INTERACTION AT ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

Athabasca University's Voluntary Assessment Program is one of many potential interactions available to support independent learners. Because of its voluntary nature it is not an intervention, but rather, it fits into the student-consumer model. The program is advertised and promoted so as to reach those students who can benefit from the program; who both need it and want it. The advertising states as clearly as possible what benefits can accrue to the learner as a consequence of the interaction. Before tests are given to students the counsellors make every effort to insure that the students understand the tests' purposes and limitations. For those tests which involve counsellor feedback these cautions are further emphasized by the counsellor when giving the feedback. An ever-present danger of most tests is that students will misunderstand the purpose or the results. This danger is magnified in situations where information and Materials are provided for the students' use according to their own purposes and for use at a distance. We must recognize the potential for misinterpretation and try to avoid it.

The Voluntary Assessment Program serves as a 'gate' into Athabasca University courses, not only for beginning students and first time registrants, but for all Athabasca students. Suitable assessment tests can enable students to determine for themselves if they are academically prepared for Athabasca courses. The voluntary nature of the program must be stressed so that it is not seen as conflicting with the University's open admissions policy. Test results can be used as a form of advice for students to consider based on their specific skills. Students are given direction, after they have obtained their results, about what to do or where to go next, whether they have the requisite skill levels for particular courses, or if they belong somewhere else. Feedback includes basic refresher material relevant to their weaknesses. This assessment program does not provide remedial, basic, or developmental instruction or upgrading. The Voluntary Assessment Program focuses on three basic areas.

Writing - With Athabasca University's Diagnostic Writing Test students can determine their writing skill levels with respect to the university standards in place in the Province of Alberta. They can obtain assistance with setting up their own individual program of writing improvement based on their test results.- The Diagnostic Writing Test is available on request to registered Athabasca University students. The test is self-administering and instructs the student to write a 400-word essay on one of four given topics in approximately two hours and with no outside help or resources. The essay is reviewed by at least two markers, once holistically and once detailed in the seven areas of content, structure, paragraphing, sentences, grammar, word use, spelling and punctuation. If the holistic and detailed marks do not agree

the essay goes to a third marker. Student Services counsellors initiate either face-to-face or telephone feedback, and this is followed up with a print-based feedback package which is sent to or given to the student along with the marked essay. Feedback includes attention to strengths and clear explanations of areas which need improvement. These explanations are cross-referenced to the comprehensive annotated bibliography included in the feedback package. Whenever possible and appropriate referrals are made to local resources.

Reading - The reading assessment test determines ability to comprehend English prose using a standardized reading level test widely used in North America (Degrees of Reading Power). One of the unique features of the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test is its complementary capability to do difficulty-level analysis of any prose material. Licensed software provides the means to determine the difficulty level of any Materials including Athabasca University course Materials. With this information students' reading scores can be text-referenced. That is, students can be told how their reading ability compares to typical Athabasca University course Materials levels (or any other prose material in which they may be interested).

One of the ways that this test is promoted is by doing a difficulty-level analysis of articles appearing in *Aurora*, the Athabasca University magazine which all students receive every three months. A brief note accompanying any article analyzed tells the reader what the difficulty level is, in DRP units. Readers are referred to the Voluntary Assessment Program advertisement elsewhere in the magazine. The advertisement gives further information on what DRP means and how students can use the DRP information by doing the Reading Assessment Test and determining their own DRP levels.

Mathematics - With the Math Skills Questionnaire (MSQ) students can compare their level of math skills against those required in certain Athabasca University courses. The MSQ is not a standardized math aptitude or achievement test. The instructions try to make it very clear to the students that the test can be used only as an indicator of whether they are able to do the math which would be required of them in the courses it identifies. When counsellors recommend the MSQ to students or actually give it to students this caution is stressed, too. Because the test is self-scoring there is no other opportunity to guide the students in their interpretation of their results.

The package includes an explanation of the test, its purpose and its limitations, and instructions for completing the test. The test itself comprises four sections of questions. Each section is relevant to different Athabasca University courses (math, accounting, and chemistry courses) and tests the math skills necessary to study those courses. An accompanying answer booklet provides very detailed, instructional solutions to all of the questions. The annotated bibliography refers students to prescriptive materials available from Athabasca University's library and in the Learning Resource Centers in Athabasca University's Regional Offices. The bibliography is categorized according to the various subject areas tested and is cross-referenced with the solutions in the answer booklet. The MSQ serves as a basic math refresher for some students, and gives direction for skill improvement. It is available on request to registered Athabasca University students and is self-administering and self-scoring.

SUMMARY

By acknowledging that the responsibility for student success squarely on the student we can consider students as consumers. Try as we might, we cannot educate unless the students want to, and know how to, learn. Educators provide opportunities for learners to improve their consumer behavior. Support services assist the learners to be better at what they are doing and help them become more active learners. Active learners are those who are in control of their consumer behavior. Although the quality of support services is gauged by various measures of student success, the support- services are not responsible for making students successful. Rather, they have the responsibility to prompt students to recognize or determine what their needs are (Brookfield, 1986), to assess students' needs, to develop and have available for consumption whatever is necessary and within their means and mandate to fulfill those needs, and to make sure that the students whose needs they can fulfill know what is available and how to make use of it.

One of the ways in which Athabasca University helps its students to be better consumers, independent learners, and active students is by means of a voluntary academic assessment program. Interaction in the form of diagnostic tests with accompanying individualized prescriptive advice and information enables students to identify and strengthen their academic weaknesses.

In distance education student interaction with support services is more apt to be by means of print, electronic media, or telecommunication than in traditional, campus-based education. It is infrequent, often unscheduled, usually at the students' discretion rather than the institutions', and only occasionally face-to-face. We need to be concerned about whether these are effective ways of interacting. Athabasca University statistics show request rates for and qualitative student feedback information from three academic assessment tests. Tracking of students who have requested these test's locks at course completion rates and subsequent registration rates (two typical institutional measures of student success) compared to the institutional rates for all students. Details of this evaluative information as well as samples of the tests, the feedback, and how test results are interpreted to students will be presented in the workshop.

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