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Use of Tutorial Support : experiences from Hong Kong distance learners

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ABSTRACT :

The use of information and communication technology in open and distance education provides students online tutorial support in addition to conventional support. However, limited research has been done on learners' perceptions of online tutorial support in Asia. The purpose of this study was to compare conventional and online tutorial supports from distance learners' perceptions at the Open University of Hong Kong, covering tutorials, surgeries, day schools, telephone tutorials, email, discussion boards, and chat rooms. The method of questionnaire survey was employed and a multi-staged sampling technique was used. 449 completed and valid questionnaires were received, giving a return rate of 39.6%. Five topics were explored in this study : the frequency of attendance or use of tutorial support, usefulness to distance learning, perceptions of tutorial support, satisfaction with teaching strategies, and expectations and needs of tutorial support. It was found from this study that, although students preferred face-to-face communication, email and discussion boards have emerged as a favourable addition to the conventional methods of student support for distance learning. It is expected that these findings will be useful for distance educators in implementing and improving their practice of tutorial support.

1. INTRODUCTION :

In the field of open and distance learning (ODL), there is an increasing need to provide effective tutorial support with a growing population that is technologically savvy and diverse in learning needs. In response, the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) has adapted its methods of tutorial support to accommodate its student population. The major adaptation has been the development and introduction of two unique online learning platforms, sparking much interest amongst its learners. Such advancements have situated the OUHK as one of the leading universities in the region offering a unique combination of courses supported by online components and conventional methods of student support. Currently the University offers over 199 courses with online features. The University has arranged such courses to provide students with greater flexibility in interacting with tutors, classmates and the content itself. These two online learning platforms facilitate this interaction, each accommodating either English or Chinese courses. These platforms are titled the Online Learning Environment (OLE) and Chinese Online Learning Environment

(COLE), created by WebCT, and Lotus Notes, respectively. The OLE was first used in 1998, followed by the introduction of the COLE in 2000. Each successive year the OUHK has integrated more courses with the use of these platforms. Students generally use these tools to collaborate with others via email, discussion boards or chat rooms, download course information, submit assignments, check student grading or course updates and as a gateway to search the Web.

There is an abundance of literature describing conventional tutorial support in ODL (e.g. Fan, 1998; Fung & Carr, 1998; Fan, et al., 1999; Jegede, et al., 1999) with the general conclusions that students learning at a distance desire more support and have a preference for support in face-to-face settings. Research has also focused on using various means of online technologies to support student learning. One example is Idrus (1993), who reports on the opportunities online technologies create for students, particularly those who are working in isolation, to promote more active learning. Brown and Duguid (1996) have reported on the collaborative opportunities supported by the medium allowing students to learn from each other, discover that others share common problems and build knowledge. Another advantage is the flexibility arising from the elimination of time constraints and the opportunity to get assistance without having to wait for set class times or office hours (Burke, 1996; Laaser, 1998). Burke has also suggested that the use of electronic tutorials may be advantageous for students who are uncomfortable to speak up in class. However, limited research has been done on making comparisons between online and conventional tutorial support from students' perceptions in Asia.

The purpose of the present study was to explore students' perceptions of face-to-face and online tutorial support at the OUHK. Face-to-face mainly includes tutorials, surgeries and day schools. Tutorials are the most common type of face-to-face meetings at the OUHK and are designed to offer regular support to learners. Normally, about 30 – 40 learners are allocated to one tutorial group, which meets for a two-hour period at regular intervals throughout the course (The Open University of Hong Kong, 1998, p.2). Surgeries provide OUHK learners with opportunity for direct and individual face-to-face consultation. Learners are invited to come to sessions arranged by the OUHK to meet their course tutors and discuss issues or problems that may arise (The Open University of Hong Kong, 1998, p.3). Day schools are designed to provide learners with opportunities for engaging in a variety of learning activities that cannot normally be covered in a tutorial (The Open University of Hong Kong, 1998, p.4). Telephone support is also offered where students may contact their tutor during fixed times to discuss various course-related issues. Online tutorial support mainly includes email, discussion boards, and chat rooms. Other features included accessing up-to-date course information, test taking and student grading. It is expected that the outcome of the study could be helpful for both its practical and theoretical contributions about the impact of the varied methods of offering support to distance learners.

2. METHODS :

2.1 Methodology :

The methodology of questionnaire survey was used in this study.

2.2 Sampling :

18 course coordinators and 39 tutors at the OUHK were invited to participate in this study. The multi-staged stratified sampling technique was employed. 18 upper-level courses (9 in Chinese, 9 in English) were selected as the sample from all the four schools of Arts & Social Science (A&SS), Business & Administration (B&A), Education & Languages (E&L), Science & Technology (S&T), plus the Li Ka Shing Institute of Professional and Continuing Education (LiPACE), at the OUHK. 1137 students were selected, and 449 completed and valid questionnaires were received. The return rate was 39.6%. The details of the sample distribution are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : The Distribution of the Sample

	Returned Questionnaires (English courses)	Returned Questionnaires (Chinese courses)	Total
A&SS	71	105	176
B&A	78	78	156
E&L	12	12	24
S&T	48	-	48
LiPACE	22	23	45
Total	231	218	449

2.3 Procedures :

The questionnaire was designed by team members and underwent a stringent validation process by two local and three international experts in the field of open and distance learning. Thereafter, a pilot study was conducted to test the suitability of the questionnaire items for the English and Chinese versions. The pilot questionnaire was distributed to 90 students, and the number of completed and valid questionnaires was 20 (14 Chinese, 6 English). The return rate was 22%. Based on these results, subsequent refinements were made. For the main study, questionnaires were mailed to students' home addresses and also distributed during tutorials to maximize the return rate. Following this procedure, telephone reminders and a second round of mailings were carried out at two weeks and at six weeks, respectively, after the first mailings. In total, 1135 students were surveyed. The number of returned valid questionnaires was 449 (39.6%). Of this population, 50.6% were female, and 49.4% were male.

The statistical package, SPSS version 11, was used for data analysis.

3. RESULTS :

The major findings from the questionnaire survey were classified into five parts: frequency of attendance or use of tutorial support, usefulness to distance learning, perceptions of tutorial support, satisfaction with teaching strategies, and expectations and needs of tutorial support.

3.1 Frequency of Attendance or Use of Tutorial Support

The subjects were asked to rate their frequency of use of seven tutorial supports based on a 5-point scale: Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely and Never. For analytic purposes Always and Often were collapsed into one column, as were Rarely and Never. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 : Tutorial Support : Frequency of Attendance or Use

Item	Frequency % (score)			Average Item Score mean ±sd
	Always (5) / Often (4)	Sometimes (3)	Rarely (2) / Never (1)	
I attend face-to-face tutorials	85.6	6.8	7.5	4.24 ±1.00
I attend day schools	74.5	12.9	12.6	3.95 ±1.20
I attend surgeries	50.8	35.7	13.5	3.49 ±1.08
I email to my tutor	44.4	30.1	25.5	3.20 ±1.22
I telephone to my tutor	38.1	31.5	30.5	2.99 ±1.15
I use discussion boards	35.9	34.5	29.5	3.03 ±1.18
I use chat rooms	12.3	40.5	47.1	2.41 ±1.03

Table 3 : Tutorial Support : Usefulness to My Learning

Item	Usefulness % (score)			Average Item Score mean ±sd
	Strongly agree (5) / Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2) / Strongly disagree (1)	
Face-to-face tutorials are useful to my learning	87.6	7.1	5.3	4.25 ±0.88
Day schools are useful to my learning	76.2	15.6	8.2	3.98 ±0.98
Surgeries are useful to my learning	59.3	33.0	7.8	3.65 ±0.94
Emailing to tutors is useful to my learning	49.6	34.0	16.4	3.40 ±1.05
Discussion boards are useful to my learning	44.1	40.1	15.8	3.32 ±1.00
Telephoning to tutors is useful to my learning	44.9	34.7	20.4	3.26 ±1.05
Chat rooms are useful to my learning	18.2	50.3	31.5	2.74 ±0.97

Table 2 shows that, among the available tutorial supports, students expressed a strong preference for face-to-face interactions. Namely, frequency of attendance or use was highest in *face-to-face tutorials* (86%), *day schools* (75%) and *surgeries* (51%). This was followed by *email* (45%) and then *telephone* (38%). Though email was a popular method for students to contact their tutor, other forms of online communication such as discussion boards (36%) and chat rooms (12%) were less favourable. A recurring theme was the reluctance amongst students to contribute actively in these open-access public forums preferring more passive roles as lurkers, or simply observing the activity and postings of others.

3.2 Usefulness to Distance Learning

As stated earlier, the OUHK provides both conventional and online tutorial supports to learners. Subjects were asked to rate the usefulness to their learning of seven tutorial supports according to five levels: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. For analytic purposes Strongly Agree and Agree were collapsed into one column, as were Disagree and Strongly Disagree. These results are given in Table 3. This practice is also applicable to Tables 4, 5 and 6.

The above table highlights that face-to-face modes of communication such as day schools, tutorials, and surgeries were more favourable to students for learning than other modes of support. While the perceived usefulness of email and discussion boards was notably lower, nearly 50% of students held positive perceptions for these tools in their learning, an alternative method for tutorial support that previously was not available to them. Furthermore, it is evident that email and discussion boards have surpassed the telephone in terms of usefulness for students' learning. At a distant last were chat rooms.

3.3 Perceptions of Tutorial Support

Student responses were sought on a variety of items dealing with the importance and adequacy of tutorial support. Table 4 below presents the results of students' responses.

Overall, it can be inferred from Table 4 that student dependency on tutorial support was extremely high. Collectively, 84% cited that tutorial support was necessary to do well in a course, while only 51% felt there was sufficient tutorial support available to learn the course material. Furthermore, only 50% of students claimed that the facilities were adequate to access tutorial support.

Table 4 : Perceptions of Tutorial Support

Item	Response % (score)			Average Item Score mean ±sd
	Strongly agree (5) / Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2) / Strongly disagree (1)	
Tutorial support is necessary for me to do well in this course	84.2	9.2	6.6	4.18 ±0.90
Tutorial support is well organized to meet course objectives	63.5	24.2	12.3	3.69 ±0.97
Tutorial Support meets my learning needs	60.4	27.5	12.0	3.58 ±0.94
There is sufficient tutorial support available to learn the course material	51.4	19.9	28.8	3.25 ±1.07
The OUHK provides sufficient means/facilities to access tutorial support	49.8	29.4	20.9	3.33 ±1.00
I do not have enough time to adequately use the tutorial support available	46.7	24.4	28.9	3.23 ±1.15

tutorial support. However, in terms of quality, 60% of students felt that tutorial support met their learning needs and that they were well organized to meet course objectives.

3.4 Satisfaction with Learning Strategies

Table 5 illustrates students' satisfaction with the learning strategies employed by their tutors. The term learning strategies is broad as there are numerous ways in which a tutor may engage students to learn and/or interact in various tutorial supports. Regardless, the intent of these items was to provide further information on where students were most comfortable in their learning environment.

Table 5 shows that in face-to-face tutorial supports student satisfaction was 51.6% or higher and substantially different from those learning strategies employed online. Similar to previous results reported earlier in this section, students were most satisfied with the learning strategies in face-to-face tutorials (62.8%). However, it should be noted that learning strategies that may be used online were likely limited to questions-and-answers indicative of the time lag with the medium.

3.5 Expectations and Needs of Tutorial Support

From their use and experience with tutorial supports, it was deemed important to ask students about what their future needs and expectations with tutorial support would be. Table 6 presents the results from those items that pertain to expectations and needs. It can be seen from Table 6 that students were highly dependent on face-to-face tutorial support and they desired more face-to-face tutorial support sessions. Regarding online support, the constraints may be a lack of training to work effectively online and the overall expectations of the student. 50% of students claimed that they would benefit from more training to communicate online, and 18% responded that they had difficulty typing in the language of instruction, signaling one area where further training should focus. Another interesting finding was that 58% of students expected a response to their online query within one day. This raises the issue of expectation between two parties when interacting online. As online communication is highly idiosyncratic, meanings and expectations may be easily misconstrued among users. Understanding students' perspectives is one

Table 5 : Satisfaction with Learning Strategies

Item	Response % (score)			Average Item Score mean ±sd
	Strongly agree (5) / Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2) / Strongly disagree (1)	
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in face to face tutorials	62.8	26.5	10.8	3.66 ±0.95
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in day schools	58.4	33.2	8.4	3.62 ±0.88
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in surgeries	51.6	42.2	6.3	3.51 ±0.79
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in email	43.2	41.8	15.1	3.31 ±0.96
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in discussion boards	40.7	46.2	13.1	3.29 ±0.93
I am satisfied with the learning strategies used by the tutor in chat rooms	16.1	60.3	23.6	2.80 ±0.92

path to improving online efficacy and use for teaching and learning in OUHK courses. Ideally, understanding of expectations from student and tutor is an important step in sustaining relationships online.

4. Discussion and Implications for Practice

Having a combined 7 years of use in OUHK courses, the OLE and COLE have emerged as favourable additions to the conventional methods of student support for distance learning. In some respects, these networked technologies are surpassing conventional modes of tutorial support.

One in particular is the telephone. Despite the apparent dependency on the telephone in Hong Kong, in the OUHK context, it appears that email has eclipsed this conventional tool for collaborative purposes in non-face-to-face settings. This is likely due to the restrictions imposed by tutors on telephone contact. Phone hours are set by tutors, and they usually distribute their residential number, rendering themselves less accessible than if they distributed their mobile phone number. Though not as immediate, email provided a more flexible environment that was reflective, retrievable (or archived) and readily accessible.

However, overall it was found that students still preferred face-to-face communication as most useful to their learning. They even called for more face-to-face tutorials. This might be explained by the traditional authoritarian teaching methods typified in Chinese cultures (Biggs, 1996) and may also point to students' dependency on teacher guidance in their study. From both an ideological and financial perspective, face-to-face support will not increase at the OUHK, certainly a situation similar to other ODL institutions. However, with exposure and experience there are positive indicators that online learning will act as a gateway to promote more interaction between learner and instructor and other learners as well.

Considering Chinese traditions in education, distance learners at the OUHK in general, may benefit more from working

Table 6 : Expectations and Needs of Tutorial Support

	Conventional Tutorial Support			
Item	Response % (score)			Average Item Score mean ±sd
	Strongly agree (5) / Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2) / Strongly disagree (1)	
I would benefit from more face-to-face Tutorial Support sessions	80.6	15.5	3.9	4.07 ±0.82
I need to attend face to face tutorials to do well in this course	80.4	13.8	5.8	4.09 ±0.87
I do not have difficulty accessing the tutor during face-to-face Tutorial Support	71.0	22.0	7.0	3.78 ±0.85
Face-to-face Tutorial Support is well structured and organized	63.6	29.0	7.5	3.66 ±0.87
I feel there should be more time to ask questions	52.6	35.4	12.0	3.50 ±0.87
I feel there should be more group work	41.1	39.5	19.4	3.27 ±1.01
	Online Tutorial Support (Zhang et al., 2003)			
I expect a response online within one day	58.4	33.1	8.4	3.67 ±0.92
I would benefit from more training to communicate online	49.9	37.5	12.6	3.46 ±0.94
I would benefit from more interaction online	48.3	42.9	8.9	3.51 ±0.93
The online Tutorial Support is well structured and organized	46.8	41.6	11.6	3.41 ±0.89
The tutor is prompt in responding to my questions or insights	45.5	43.0	11.5	3.39 ±0.88
The tutor employs strategies to encourage dialogue among students online	35.0	46.9	18.1	3.17 ±0.88
I have difficulty typing in the language of instruction	17.5	26.4	56.2	2.37 ±1.13

with others, exchanging ideas and having a greater role in the teaching and learning process. Though these settings in distance education are atypical, the integration of networked technologies can facilitate such interactive elements and positively affect the distance learning environment due to their collaborative capabilities. In some respects these online communication tools are eclipsing the use of the telephone, and the majority of respondents support Internet use as it facilitates efficient communication between classmates and tutors and is also a gateway to seek information.

Providing workshops to course coordinators and tutors is also needed. It appears that some educators are reluctant to regularly use the online supports available to them and refrain from emphasizing the use of such supports to students. Increasing understanding of the online learning environment among educators would likely increase awareness and motivation among students to use online supports in their coursework.

5. CONCLUSION

The outcomes from this investigation suggest that the OUHK has made reasonable advancements in online learning to enhance the conventional methods of student support for distance learning. However, despite the Internet's popularity with students, the majority is clearly more comfortable and familiar with face-to-face interaction. Students claim that they need more training and exposure with Internet learning and interactive tools. From this investigation, two major claims of OUHK students were that tutorial support was necessary to do well in a course and there was insufficient tutorial support available. Increasing the role of online learning environments in courses is a cost-efficient alternative to address these claims.

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